STC

JUNE 2015

intercom

THE MAGAZINE OF THE SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

CAREER MANAGEMENT AND PROSPERITY

CAREER MANAGEMENT FOR YOUR 20S, 30S, 40S, AND 50S 6

IS THE EMERGING ROLE OF THE CONTENT ENGINEER A FIT FOR YOU? 9

BECOME THE DRIVING FORCE IN YOUR OWN CAREER 14

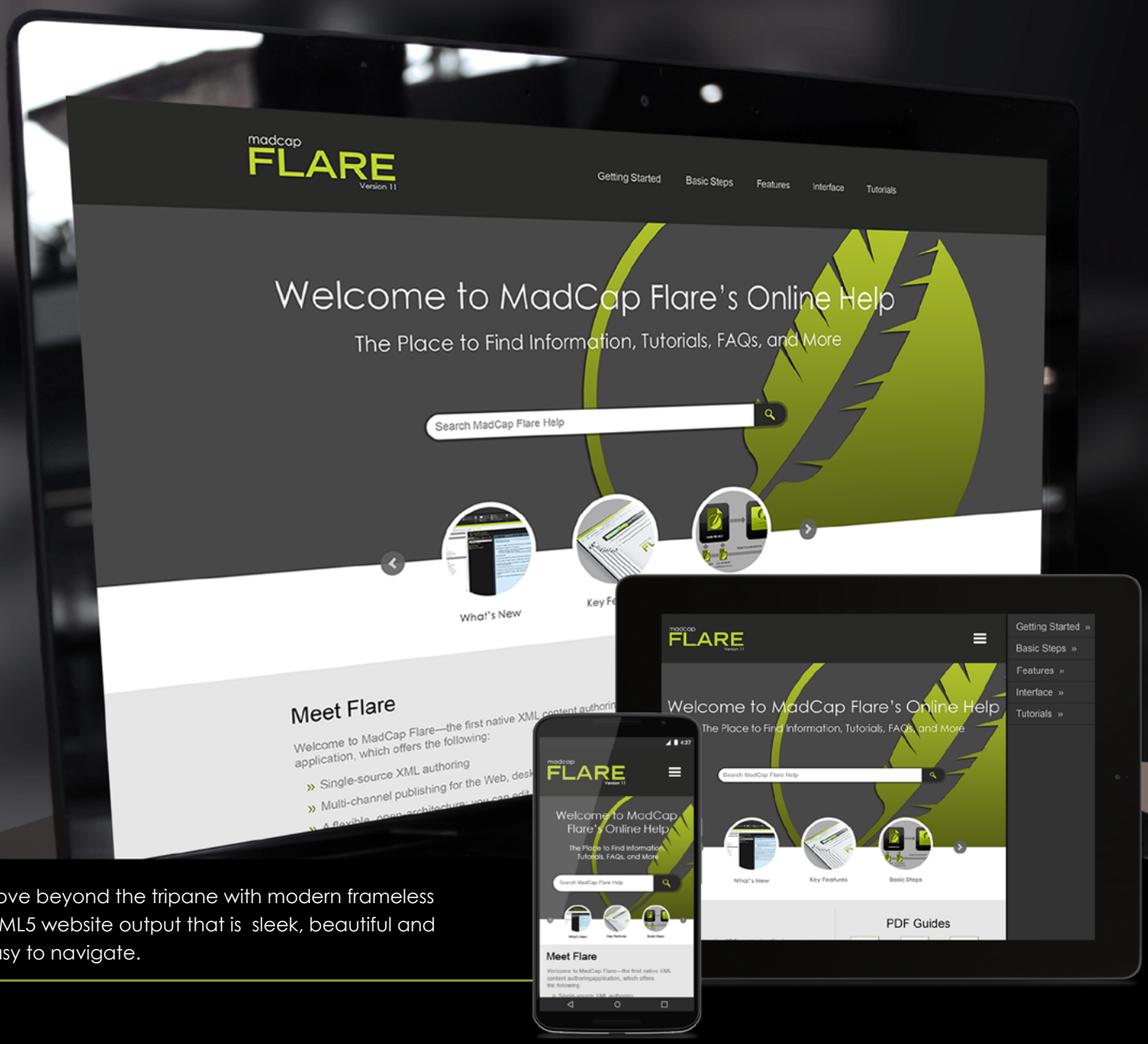
SEVEN SOFT SKILLS FOR SUPER SUCCESS 17

BECOMING AN INFLUENCER: IT'S EASIER THAN YOU THINK 20

CREATING TECHCOMM NIRVANA 24

The Evolution of Content Development

Introducing FLARE™ 11



Move beyond the tripane with modern frameless HTML5 website output that is sleek, beautiful and easy to navigate.

“ I'm thrilled that MadCap Flare 11 gives me the tools I need to break free of the tripane interface for HTML5 output, something my clients have been clamoring for. I'm equally thrilled that Flare 11 supports GIT, another popular wish from my clients. ”

Nita Beck | **Consultant and MadWorld Conference Speaker**

DOWNLOAD FREE TRIAL **LEARN MORE**

Copyright © 2015, MadCap Software, Inc., and its licensors. All rights reserved. MadCap Software, the MadCap Software logo, and MadCap Flare are trademarks or registered trademarks of MadCap Software, Inc., in the United States and/or other countries. Other marks are the properties of their respective owners.

madcap software

Are You Using Microsoft® Word™ to Create Your Documentation? Use Doc-to-Help to Get the Most Out of Your Content.

Content Management, Maximum Content Re-use, and Multi-channel Publishing.

Easy Content Authoring

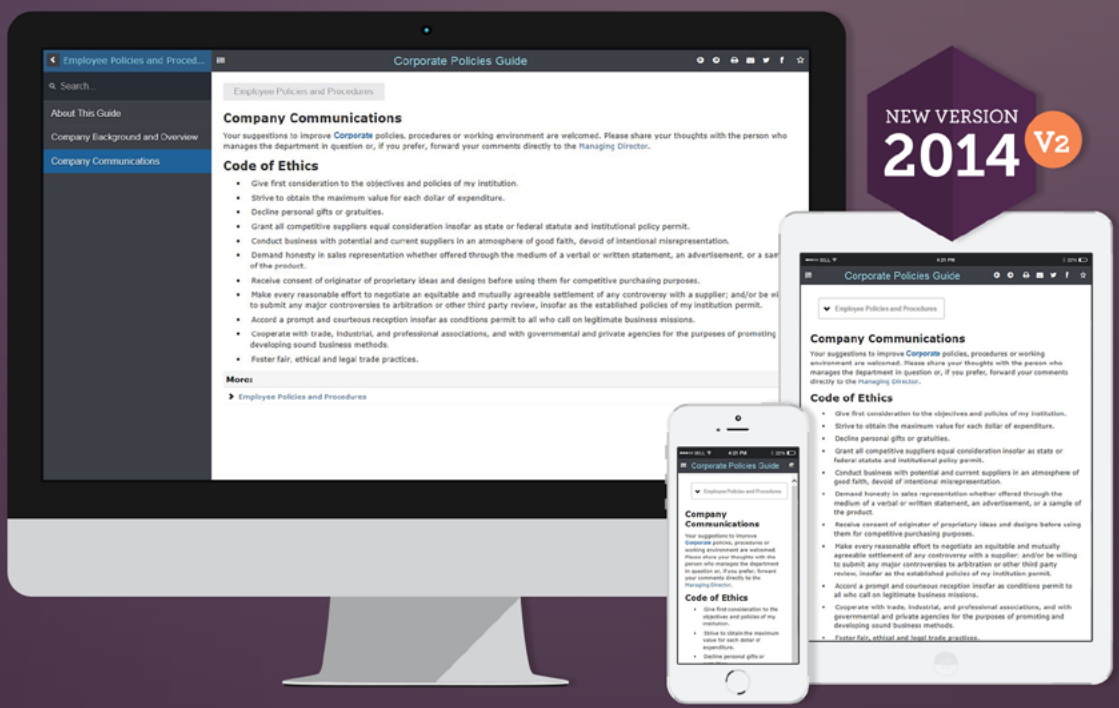
Integrates directly into your Microsoft® Word™ interface.

Efficient Collaboration & Management

Choose from built-in technology, Microsoft® SharePoint®, or Microsoft® Team Foundation Server to work with teams.

Powerful Multi-channel Publishing

Write once and publish to the Web, desktop Help formats, mobile devices, eBooks, and print.



doc·to·help®
by madcap software

Download a Free Trial at
doctohelp.com

Copyright © 2015, MadCap Software, Inc., and its licensors. All rights reserved. MadCap Software, the MadCap Software logo, and Doc-to-Help are trademarks or registered trademarks of MadCap Software, Inc., in the United States and/or other countries. Other marks are the properties of their respective owners.

June 2015

Volume 62 | Issue 6

4 **From the Editor**

4 **From the Guest Editor**

5 **STC President Bernard Aschwanden's Inaugural Address**

FEATURES

CAREER MANAGEMENT AND PROSPERITY

6 **Career Management for Your 20s, 30s, 40s, and 50s**
By Victoria (Vici) Koster-Lenhardt
The author provides career advice for technical communicators in every decade of their working lives.

9 **Is the Emerging Role of the Content Engineer a Fit for You?**
By Cruce Saunders
Do you naturally bridge business strategy and content strategy with design and implementation? Do you currently marry content technology and content management to the total customer experience? If so, this article will show you how you may be a content engineer.

14 **Become the Driving Force in Your Own Career: A Technical Writer's Guide To Success**
By Tom Aldous
The author explains how technical communication work makes an impact, and how making yourself memorable is easier than you may think.

17 **Seven Soft Skills for Super Success**
By Barbara A. Giammona
A list of the most important soft skills for today's technical communicator—observation, curiosity, critical thinking, leadership, flexibility, social intelligence, and communication.

20 **Becoming an Influencer: It's Easier Than You Think**
By Lisa Pietrangeli
Via the author's five-step process, learn how to be more proactive and influence decisions that will help your own work environment, your team's productivity, and your company's bottom line.

Build a Better Workplace

Graduate Programs in
Organizational Performance and Workplace Learning

OPWL Students Won the 2014 ISPI Case Study Competition!

Accredited • Award-Winning Graduates • Workplace Focused

Earn the OPWL Master's Degree to:

- Build the skills necessary to improve workplace performance in ways that organizations value
- Work on actual instructional design, needs assessment, evaluation, and research projects for real clients
- Engage in individual learning within a community of practice

Upgrade your skills with a Certificate in these areas:

- Performance Improvement
- Instructional Design
- E-Learning Development

Get Started Today!

(208) 426-2489
jfenner@boisestate.edu
opwl.boisestate.edu/stc

APPLY NOW FOR FALL

BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY

31

32

36

24 **A Printer, a Desktop, and a Tablet Walk into a Bar: Creating TechComm Nirvana**
By Christopher Ward
According to the author's philosophy, three questions will put you on the path to Nirvana—Whom do you serve? What is the desired outcome? And do you have the resources? Learn how to find the answers to these questions.

SOCIETY PAGES

26 ***Badass*—An Interview with Kathy Sierra**
By Nicky Bleiel

30 **Society-Level Offices for 2016**
By Aiessa Moyna

30 **Couldn't Attend the Summit? Now You Can with Summit Playback!**

COLUMNS

ADVANCING YOUR CAREER
31 **Add What You Want, Subtract What You Don't**
By Jack Molisani

BEYOND THE BLEEDING EDGE
32 **Trying Virtual Reality on the Cheap With Google Cardboard**
By Neil Perlin

DEPARTMENTS

FYI
35 **Mark Your Calendar**
Organization Events Across the Globe

OFF HOURS
36 **Ask Me What I'm Knitting**
By Cindy Pao, with Sharon Burton, Vici Koster-Lenhardt, Julia Land, Cheryl Landes, Marcia Riefer Johnston, Jamye Sagan, Val Swisher, and Danielle Villegas

ADVERTISERS

C3	**Adobe**
2	**Boise State University**
C2	**Doc-To-Help**
C4	**MadCap Software**
13	**The LavaCon Conference**
29	**STC Membership**
29	**TechScribe**

24

intercom

Intercom, the magazine of the Society for Technical Communication, is published to provide practical examples and applications of technical communication that will promote its readers' professional development.

Publisher Society for Technical Communication
Editor Elizabeth E. (Liz) Pohland
Assistant Editor Marisa Seitz

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS
Scott Abel, *Meet the Change Agents*
Andrea Ames and Alyson Riley, *The Strategic IA*
Thomas Barker, *The Academic Conversation*
Nicky Bleiel, *The Essentials*
Jack Molisani, *Advancing Your Career*
Neil E. Perlin, *Beyond the Bleeding Edge*
Linda Roberts and Lisa Cook, *All Access*
Derek Ross, *Ethics*
Kirk St.Amant, *Student Perspectives*
Kirk St.Amant, *Working Locally, Communicating Globally*
Brian Still, *Trends in Usability*

EDITORIAL ADVISORY PANEL
Beth Agnew, Barrie Byron,
Liz Herman (Chair), Alan Houser

STC BOARD OF DIRECTORS
Officers
Kit Brown-Hoekstra, *President*
Bernard Aschwanden, *Vice President*
Nicoletta A. Bleiel, *Immediate Past President*
Jane Wilson, *Treasurer*
Alyssa Fox, *Secretary*
Directors Charles Fisher, Ray Gallon,
Deanne Levander, Ben Woelk

SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION
9401 Lee Highway, Suite 300
Fairfax, VA 22031-1803
+1(703) 522-4114 | +1(703) 522-2075 fax
Send questions and correspondence to the editor at the above address. General information about STC: stc@stc.org *or* www.stc.org.

Address Changes: membership@stc.org
Intercom Editorial: intercom@stc.org

Reprint Permissions: www.copyright.com
Intercom (ISSN 0164-6206) is published 10 times a year (monthly, except for August and December) by the Society for Technical Communication, 9401 Lee Highway, Suite 300, Fairfax, VA 22031-1803, a nonprofit educational organization, as a service to its membership. Membership in STC includes a subscription to **Intercom**. Periodicals postage paid at Fairfax, VA, and additional offices.
Postmaster Send address changes to **Intercom**, Attn: Membership, c/o Society for Technical Communication, 9401 Lee Highway, Suite 300, Fairfax, VA 22031-1803.

Copyright © 2015 by the Society for Technical Communication. All rights reserved. Printed in the USA.

All articles in **Intercom** are copyrighted by the authors unless otherwise indicated. Anyone interested in reprints, reproductions, or reuse must contact the authors for permission.
To advertise in **Intercom**, contact Stacey O'Donnell at *stacey.odonnell@stc.org*, Society for Technical Communication, 9401 Lee Highway, Suite 300, Fairfax, VA 22031.
Ph: +1(703) 522-4114; Fax: +1(703) 522-2075.

A Note from the Editor

JUNE INTERCOM IS guest edited by Jack Molisani with a theme of career management and prosperity. Jack is president of ProSpring Technical Staffing, executive director of The LavaCon Conference on Content Strategy and TechComm Management, and author of *Be The Captain of Your Career: A New Approach To Career Planning and Development*. He has solicited six articles that showcase ways to be more successful and influential in the workplace. This issue also marks the retirement of Jack's column Advancing Your Career. Thank you, Jack, and all the authors in this issue of *Intercom* for your expertise and assistance with promoting our professional development.

—Liz Pohland
liz.pohland@stc.org

From the Guest Editor

I RECENTLY HAD the pleasure or hearing STC Past President Andrea Ames speak at a conference. (Andrea is the first woman in the history of IBM to rise to her level from an information development track.) She presented an inspiring keynote on career development titled, "Forget 'Predict' the Future—*Create* the Future!"*

In her keynote, Andrea reminded us to not only watch for career opportunities, but to *create* career opportunities. So when *Intercom* Editor Liz Pohland asked me shortly thereafter if I'd be interested in guest editing an issue of *Intercom*, I said, "Yes, and I have a perfect theme in mind: career management and prosperity!"

I firmly believe people should learn from the success and failures of others (it's faster than making them all yourself), so this issue contains career advice from some stellar leaders in the content development field. While some of the authors are seasoned veterans and some are up-and-coming stars—all are successful at what they do.

The issue starts with an article on strategic career planning by STC Fellow Victoria (Vici) Koster-Lenhardt, the global employment advisor for Europe at the U.S. Department of State. Cruce Saunders, author of *Content Engineering for a Multi-Channel World*, has written an article about the emerging role of the content engineer, and Tom Aldous explains how to become the driving force in your career. Barbara Giammona writes about the seven soft skills for super success, Lisa Pietrangeli tells us how to be an influencer, and Christopher Ward follows with and article titled, "A Printer, a Desktop, and a Tablet Walk into a Bar: Creating TechComm Nirvana."

Closing the issue is the final installment of my quarterly career column, in which I share a life-shaping lesson I learned from the novel *The Chronicles of Amber* by Roger Zalazney.

I hope you enjoy reading this issue as much as we enjoyed contributing to it.

—Jack Molisani
Jack@ProspringStaffing.com

*Note: Andrea Ames's keynote address can be viewed at *http://lavacon.org/2014/program*. Many thanks to Adobe Systems for hosting the session on Adobe Connect and making the presentation available for free to the technical communication community.

STC President Bernard Aschwanden's Inaugural Address

BY BERNARD ASCHWANDEN | *President and Associate Fellow*

Editor's Note: Bernard Aschwanden was formally installed as STC President at the Annual Business Meeting during the Summit on Monday, 22 June. Below is a draft of his planned remarks, provided to Intercom *to share with the entire Society.*

THANK YOU. To the STC's past, current, and future members and volunteers, and also to the Board, staff, and families who support us in what we do. Your efforts got us here, so thanks.

Bear with me as I recap a moment from a past conference. After an overnight flight with little sleep, I wanted to say "hi" to a presenter—an STC President—and the only person who saw me sneak into the back of the room. My plan was to relax before my afternoon presentation. A few slides later, the speaker said, quite loudly, "Bernard, do you have any ideas?" Startled, I looked up at a slide, which asked in bold letters, "**What is the FIRST rule of technical communication?**"

Good question. Let's add to that and ask, "What is the first rule of technical communication in context of STC?" Is it to listen?

Feedback on almost everything we do is immediate and arrives in multiple formats, such as an email, phone call, meeting request, Facebook posting, Twitter message, blog article, or dozens of other ways our audience reaches out to us. We need to listen, but listening is not the FIRST rule.

I believe you deserve honest and respectful communication on why STC makes the decisions it does. STC communities face change and challenges. Although we may differ on ideas or how they are implemented, we do them in the best interest of STC membership. Financially, we aren't out of the woods, but we see light beyond the trees. Membership has stabilized after many years of decline. We communicate a lot of information, good and bad. We need to communicate, but it's not the FIRST rule.

The STC Board listens to you and to STC staff, lawyers, accountants, and partners we work with. With informed opinions after hearing ideas, costs, and risks, we hope to take the right actions. It's a difficult job, but a rewarding one, like many of our full-time jobs. We strive to balance the needs of audiences, the wants of stakeholders, and the availability of resources. We need to know the parameters of all three to act in the best interests of our Society. A drive to action, though, is not the FIRST rule.

To recap: We need to listen, communicate, and act. We do so for our audience—the Society—but we also need to do so for our future audience. Without growing our audience, all that we do would be for no one.

Rule 1 therefore is: **Know your audience**.

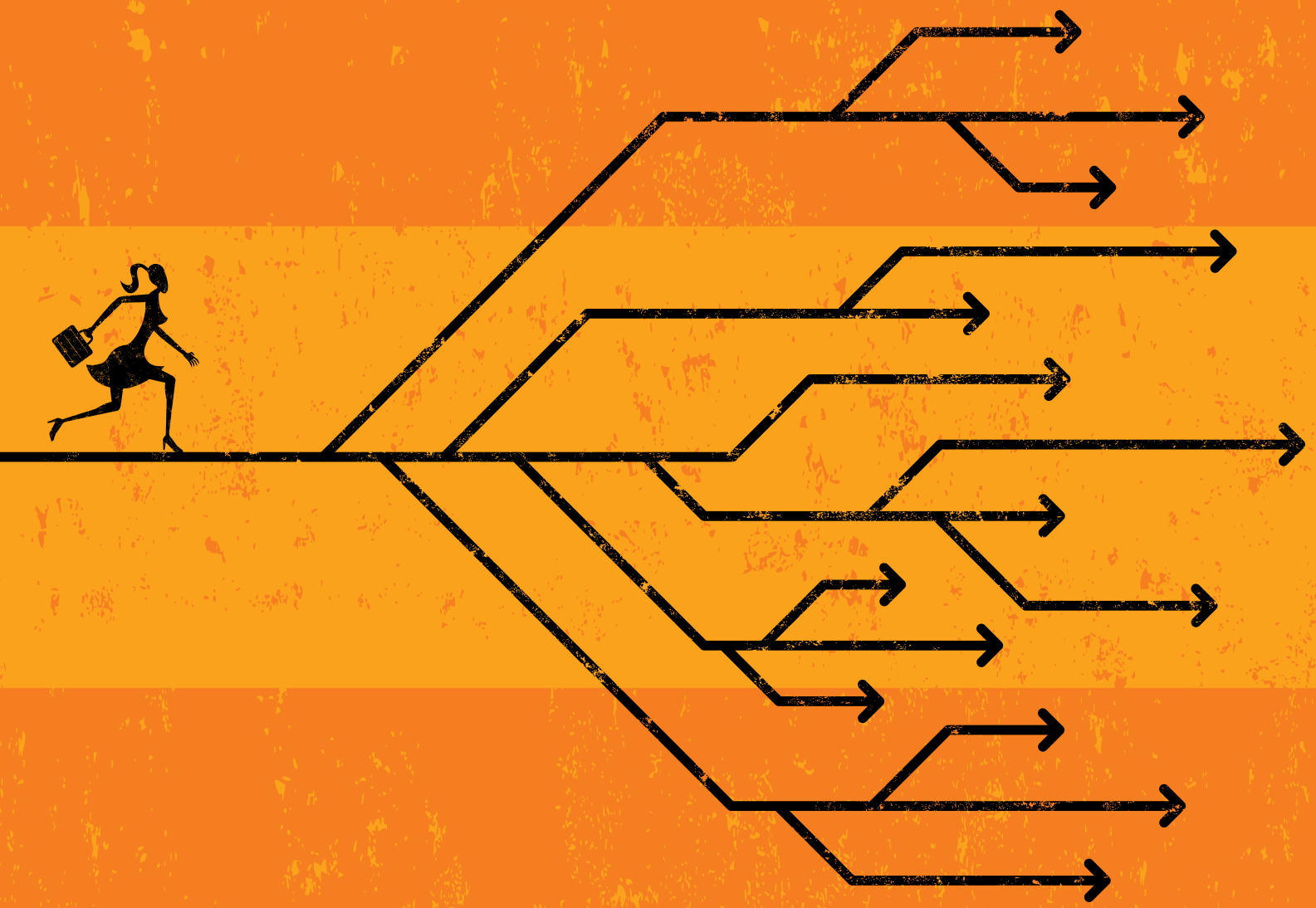
The Board serves to represent our audience—an audience of members in the thousands who can't all be here, but who are represented when they vote, participate in a local community, join a SIG, or at the most basic level each year as they renew their membership. We are, however, a smaller part of the entire audience of all technical communicators.

STC has always been about knowing your audience. Let's prove to employers, hiring managers, department heads, executives, and ultimately anyone who pays for what we do, the value of what we do. We *are* business. STC members connect buyers and business, and we increase the likelihood of landing a contract or making a sale, and we do it through professional technical communication.

STC members add value to the bottom line. How? Excellence in documentation. We achieve this by participating in professional development including education sessions, conferences, in-depth webinars, hands-on workshops, community-level peer-to-peer events, and leadership development. We do it through certification, training, and mentoring. Think about that. We participate in these events to change what we know and how we interact with others.

We also need to change our Society to stay ahead of the curve, to be the destination people want to get to. I envision a year of change and growth with a push to prove to businesses the value of content as a corporate asset, and to position STC members as the curators of that content. Business assets include products, people, and patents, but it also includes content, copyright, and creativity. These are areas in which STC members excel. Let's find ways to prove this.

STC is 6000 strong, but there are easily tens of thousands of people who are involved in our profession globally, across millions of businesses. They work like we do, on the cutting edge of technology, they feel the pulse of the industry. We need to identify ways to communicate, to listen, and to encourage them to join us in STC. Thank you for your support.



shutterstock.com/ retrorocket

Career Management for Your 20s, 30s, 40s, and 50s

By VICTORIA (VICI) KOSTER-LENHARDT | *Fellow*

WHERE ARE YOU in your career today? Do you have a strategy, or are you a leaf floating down the river of life, going wherever the current takes you?

Jack Molisani and I have been talking about career management since 2001, when we sat on an STC Summit conference panel about the topic. Jack often reminds me that "You don't get to vote on the way things are—you already did," meaning every choice you made (or failed to make) in the past has lead you to where you are today. Like compounded interest, small changes you make now can have a big effect on your career down the road.

Each decade in life presents its own opportunities and challenges for career management. As we grow older, we become wiser. Every step of the way, we use newfound wisdom to make better decisions that expand our horizons. Milestones along the way give us the chance to stop, reflect, and make some adjustments before taking the next step. Whether you are a new graduate, in the middle of your career, or a decade or less away from retirement, you have choices to proactively direct your career in a way that makes the most sense to you. The question is, will you?

Your 20s: The Graduate

Just out of college with a new degree, young graduates have a fresh perspective and often (but not always) strong ambitions for a career. Companies want to hire you if you have good technical skills and a broad understanding of the industry. Mid-career managers see you as the kids who grew up with the latest technologies and expect that is how you will add value to the current team.

You are at the beginning of your career. Some of you already have your sights on being promoted into management quickly, because that's where the salary growth is higher. Perhaps you're a natural leader and often delegated the management role on projects, so you think a promotion will come easily. Although this could happen, the reality is you need to work three to five years to gain the writing experience and exposure on larger projects before you are promotable in large corporate environments. This is less true in small startups, which are more nimble and offer more opportunities for advancement. (Assuming, of course, the startup really takes off.)

One way to enhance your leadership and management skills during this period is to volunteer with the professional organizations that match your passion. Start networking with key leaders in the field. Make yourself visible and get involved. Volunteer to lead low-risk projects where you can practice leadership and management and (occasionally) make a few mistakes. As Bonni Graham-Gonzales says, "Good judgement comes from experience, a lot of which comes from bad judgement." Gain the experience and then let your managers know you have what's needed for the next step.

Your 30s: The Specialist

With several years of work experience behind you, you will come to a multi-pronged fork in the road and will need to make important decisions affecting your career strategy. Some choices include:

Stay the Course: Do you like your job the way it is, or do you want to do something new? I know many people who love what they do and want to do just that—no management track for them! Realize that deciding to not change is still a decision, one that will affect your career down the line. Also remember that deciding to not change isn't forever, it's just for now. Perhaps you have children

and it is more important to have a stable job and a stable income than to work in a more exciting (but less stable) environment. You can always change your mind later.

Continue Your Education: Do you want to get a certification in a particular subject matter, or maybe go for a Master's degree? This choice requires time and money.

Consider Management vs. a Technical Track: Do you want to be promoted to a management position? Be ready to work longer hours, show loyalty and dedication, and have less time for your family, friends, and hobbies. Do you want to change direction and get on the technical track? (For example, moving from a technical writer to a systems analyst.) If management isn't what you want to do, you can sometimes earn a salary equivalent to a management position with technical skills.

Change Directions: Perhaps a 9-to-5 job isn't your ideal work environment, and you're thinking of going solo in the next few years (either as an independent contractor or by starting your own business). Do you want to change careers or perhaps move into a new industry sector? It's not a bad time to switch.

Whichever choice you make, this is the time to decide how you want to specialize. It's too early to think about what your legacy will be, but it *is* the right time to start thinking and take action to define your special niche in your chosen industry. In 2015, there are more career options than ever, and there are many professional organizations to help you decide before you invest the bigger bucks in advanced degrees and certifications.

Use the decade to specialize in more than one area, too. Follow the path by doing more of what you enjoy and being more of who you are.

Your 40s: The Expert

By their 40s, many people begin feeling a deep sense of self-confidence and awareness of the knowledge that they've acquired. Even if you haven't followed a pre-defined and perfectly executed path, you will probably go through this phase. This is the time in your life when your priorities, likes, and dislikes become clearer. Once you acknowledge what you've accomplished so far, doors start opening. You are now the expert (or becoming an expert) in your specialization or niche. Colleagues at work and in your profession know who you are. They've watched you grow, whether you realize it or not. Now is the time to reap what you've sowed in your 20s and 30s and enjoy being the expert.

At work, this might mean being offered (and asking for!) plum assignments—those that are the most desirable. If things aren't unfolding at work the way you'd like them to, it's still a good time to consider changing departments or companies. An alternative to a job change is volunteering in an organization that values your expertise. Sometimes this is a great way to balance a solid job that you're not particularly passionate about with an activity that energizes you.

One cautionary note: when you become the expert, people will ask you to do things—often for free. It feels really good when this begins to happen and is a sign of your achievement. Be prepared, however, to say yes *and* no. Some people won't do anything for free. Others will do everything for free in order to gain more knowledge, experience, and recognition. Others fall somewhere in between. Be aware of your preference and the consequences of your approach. Consider balancing some pro bono work with paid work and vice versa. In your 40s, you're still building your reputation. How you handle being an expert will influence the options available to you in your 50s.

Your 50s: The Self-Actualizer

Sometime around your 50th birthday (give or take a few years), something may happen that significantly changes your life: divorce, an important person in your life dies or becomes very ill, your health suddenly changes, children go off to college or get married, or you're laid off from a job. Any one of these can reset the course of your career and it will often be scary. For some people, "scary" is inspiring. For others, it's depressing or debilitating. However you manage this transition (and it *is* a transition), you will redefine your self, (re)discover your passions, and find a depth within yourself that you never knew existed. You will start a new journey of self-actualization and a new strategy will manifest itself.

At this point, you have many options because you have developed many skills, gained in-depth experience, and interacted with lots of people. Now is the time to take inventory, stop doing what you don't enjoy (even if you're good at it), continue doing what you *do* enjoy, and figure out the best way to earn the most money you can (for retirement) while leveraging all that you are. You may find that you are now able to steer your career in a direction where you combine any desires to give back with earning an income. So experiment until you get it right.

Your career strategy *really is* about the adventure, *not* the destination!

The Career of a Lifetime

Before flipping the page or closing this magazine, consider your next career move right now. Be strategic about it. Consider your options.

Where do you want to go on the chess board of your life?

Small moves are as significant as big moves.

Make each one count!

A U.S. expat living in Vienna, Austria, since 1987, VICI KOSTER-LENHARDT *(*vkosterlenhardt@gmail.com*) was a pioneer in promoting technical communication as a profession in Western Europe during the 1990s and 2000s. After 21 years in various communications roles at The Coca-Cola Company, Vici changed careers in 2010. She is currently a consultant working at the U.S. Department of State where she is a job search strategist and career coach supporting the family members of Foreign Service officers find employment while living in Europe. She will give the opening keynote at The LavaCon Conference in New Orleans, LA, 18–21 October 2015.*

Is the Emerging Role of the Content Engineer a Fit for You?

By CRUCE SAUNDERS

shutterstock.com/ PureSolution

THE ERA OF customer experience management (CEM) is upon us. The customer is calling the shots and technical communicators are scrambling to deliver the goods across an expanding buffet of audiences, devices, and channels. Executive teams are beginning to realize that positioning strategy involves storytelling and the means to deliver the organization's story and promise to customers, and to involve customers as players in the organization's story.

The CEM vision has to be tied together and made operational—you cannot have this vision disconnected from the technical reality of your projects. It all must be aligned. Missing any part of the continuum introduces unsustainable project risk for CEM initiatives, and many technical communicators are considering what new practices to adopt, such as content engineering, to ensure long-term success.

Customer experience matters. App stores and native mobile apps matter. Search engine results matter. Social matters. On-site search matters. Offline experience matters. New devices and channels make the landscape more complex each quarter. To reach diverse channels that content consumers use, every content asset must adapt. Whether text, video, images, tabular data, or audio, all content and metadata must meet consumers on the consumers' terms.

Content engineering delivers the goods by aligning the right team members to implement a solution that connects content to strategy, strategy to creative, and visual design to platform technology.

Think of a content strategist (CS) as the CEO of content, and think of a content engineer (CE) as the CTO of content. Each contributes a different perspective, and with workflow and governance they help define the "people" and relationships to support content through the entire content lifecycle. Content strategy is about what content gets to which customers, at which touch points. Content engineering is about how content gets to customers.

Many technical communicators are already actively engaged in the CE role yet may not identify with the title. CEs work closely with content strategists and developers but remain distinct from these functions. These individuals naturally bridge business strategy and content strategy with design and implementation, and work to marry content technology and content management to the total CEM vision—these are the prime candidates for the content engineering role.

The CE translates what is required from the content strategy and determines in detail how it can be done most effectively. He or she specifies how different audience segments should receive content, how different devices should display content, and how to specify content depending on up-sell or cross-sell potential. The CE develops a detailed content model and taxonomy that provides the framework for these capabilities to be implemented.

The developer will take the content model and taxonomy created by the CE and use this to implement the functionality in code. Normally, the developer will not have the experience in audiences and marketing-oriented business requirements, or expertise building taxonomies or content structuring, and will rely on the CE to specify these requirements.

The content strategist, information architect, and content engineer all play starring roles in crafting personalized customer experiences. CEs add value to CEM projects both in terms of direct responsibilities and deliverables, as well as by collaborating and helping facilitate deliverables from other members of the CEM project team. It certainly takes a village to architect nimble customer experiences.

Building a Content Engineering Practice Starting with Existing Staff

Great CEs are multiplex thinkers, capable of pattern recognition among multiple strata and multiple dimensions. These individuals naturally connect to the content strategy at a visionary level and map that strategy to all the enabling technologies. Above all, insightful and comfortable communicating between disciplines, they are able to use their cross-functional abilities to see relationships and build information structures others might find daunting.

To find the natural born CEs for your CEM teams, look for those who have at least some background as generalist Web developers and who additionally exhibit the following characteristics:

- They might not be deep *coders*, but they understand and can work with CSS, JavaScript, HTML, and related responsive frameworks such as Bootstrap.
- They might not be deep *content strategists*, but they understand the content strategy role and functions with some level of intimacy.
- They might not be expert *user experience designers*, but they understand information architecture, user heuristics, and prototyping tools and approaches.
- They might not be deep *search engine optimization (SEO) specialists,* but they understand how content, schemas, metadata, PageRank, and content relationships influence content placement, structure, and ranking within search engine results pages (SERPs).
- They might not be *software engineers*, but they understand the Web and software development lifecycle (SDLC), the software and hardware stack that delivers Web applications, and core application architecture concepts.
- They might not be *native iOS or Android mobile application developers*, but they understand how apps consume content APIs and send user-generated content back to the CEM platform.
- They might not be *database administrators* (DBAs), but they understand the basics of data modeling, database design, entity relationships, and the value of data structure and normalization.
- They might not be expert *digital marketers*, but they understand sales funnels, marketing automation, a/b testing, conversion optimization, and the importance of capturing and guiding user attention.
- They might not be *project managers*, but they understand project rhythms, structures, collaboration approaches, and they work well as facilitators and communicators.

Of course the CE must be trained on content modeling, metadata structures, schemas, and taxonomy. These elements for the foundation of how content relationships are defined and communicated.

Integrating the Content Engineering Practice

It takes simple changes to existing standard workflows to integrate content engineering. Content engineering simply adds a role, minor process additions, and some deliverables to existing process. Moving from static wireframes to interactive prototypes (using Axure or other interactive prototyping tools) is indispensable for CEM. The prototypes are a meeting place for content strategy, IA/UX, content engineering, design, and development to meet and collaborate.

Adding content engineering need not disrupt years of careful process development and optimization; it augments and enhances existing processes. However, skipping content engineering effectively removes the scaffolding for every implementation stage within an effective CEM initiative. Some examples:

- Without a content model, UX designers and the CMS developers both guess at what content elements will be reused, how and when, often resulting in broken, inconsistent content types.
- Content authors get stuck into working with static chunks, taxing the authoring process and locking content up into unwieldy containers.
- Without a taxonomy and metadata model, the CMS configuration offers no related content organization outside a hierarchical set of content folders, essentially trapping content to an isolated location.
- Without identification, and incorporation of schemas and content standards into the implementation, content cannot syndicate across the Internet or be consumed and presented richly by important search engines.

For advanced content marketing, content engineering is not nice-to-have or optional. For effective customer experience management, it's essential.

Building Content Engineering Change within Your Organization

You may find it challenging to define the CE's role in comparison to the market's evolving definitions. Simple [A] (*www.simplea.com*) holds that the role of the content engineer is key to success for any complex content-centric project involving content production and software system development.

Once your organization is ready for content engineering, you must build a practice and center of excellence around content engineering skills, disciplines, and processes. Most organizations will find that building a content engineering discipline best starts at home. Find the raw aptitude internally. Train the skills. Augment from the outside. Grow a CE, or multiple CEs. Then start to document and build the practice around those newly minted.

To find a CE internally, consider staff aptitudes and interests, introduce the concepts, and see what resonates. Key candidates will recognize the role immediately and gravitate to learning more and practicing in the space. You might find your CE in a business analyst (BA) or marketing analyst, or an experienced Web developer that carries strategic and technical perspectives.

Build toward talents able to unravel the complexity of your disparate content technologies and strategies. The CE should become a pivotal component of your CEM process; working with internal marketing, agency creative and strategy, and platform and implementation partners.

Personalization and a strong customer experience strategy built on adaptive content and responsive design is possible. With help from a CE, the implementation team can bridge the integration gap between content strategy, content management system planning and platforms, and CEM technologies and initiatives.

Content engineers and content strategists are often senior members of the CEM team, but ultimately both should be integrated into the development workflow.

Teams where the strategists develop solutions working with business stakeholders exclusively, and then simply issue them to the development teams, are less likely to succeed. Integrating CSs and CEs into the development cycle improves project success.

Content engineering fits well into either an Agile or waterfall development lifecycle. Because of the tight alignment between strategy and application development, integrating everyone into a single workflow ensures communication and integration of disciplines.

For more traditional waterfall cycles, content engineering can be considered a phase following content strategy, and then running concurrent to development.

In general, for Agile teams, a Scrum methodology seems to work well. CEs get integrated into daily team standups; they also work against a backlog and tackle work in sprints. They can see their inputs mapped to outputs and influence ad-hoc decision making on the part of development teams.

It's important for organizations contemplating developing a content engineering practice to understand that content engineering adds significant time and cost up front, but saves even more time and cost on the backend. Whichever methodology is chosen, know that content engineering is iterative and collaborative, and best played as a team sport.

Justifying Content Engineering

Content engineering is a vital piece of the CEM puzzle that no one realizes they need until it's missing at the end—when it's too late.

If content is electrical power, content engineering provides the wiring. When constructing a building, would you add beautiful light fixtures, powerful appliances, and power outlets but no electrical wiring to connect them? No transformers to move current from one state to another? Inconceivable, and yet the number one complaint we hear from agencies, integrators, and in-house marketing departments is that executive decision makers do not understand content engineering and are not willing to pay for it.

Let there be light.

Here are a few of the reasons that executives must embrace investments in content engineering:

1. **Far more efficient development cycles and developer time investment**
   Without content engineering, we are asking software engineers to spend time on configuration and strategy rather than developing software. This reduces efficiency and lengthens development cycles while reducing quality in CEM projects.
2. **Efficiency of CEM license cost investment, and more value for the money**
   CEM software is expensive. Implementing it poorly is even more expensive. Leaving valuable marketing functionality underutilized carries opportunity costs. By investing in content engineering, the return on investment (ROI) for CEM accelerates, while effectiveness improves.
3. **Insurance policy for CEM long-term**
   Even if utilization of all potential CEM strategies is a far-off dream compared to the current level of maturity in the marketing department, having a well-engineered content platform in place ensures CEM is possible. Without that strong platform, CEM will always be a far-off dream.
4. **Improved sales lifecycle, sales performance, sales metrics, and sales channels**
   Content engineering influences sales directly by connecting buyers with the related content and products most interesting to them. It also enables segmentation of content types and creation of detailed reports showing content engagement and its relationship to sales. Of course, content engineering also facilitates multi-channel publishing which expands selling channels.
5. **Improved customer satisfaction**
   Content personalization significantly improves the customer's experience with the enterprise, by making interactions more relevant and rewarding. It's only through intelligent content engineering that true content personalization is possible.
6. **Marketing and IT peacemaking: happier developers, and happier marketers**
   Without content engineering, content strategists and marketers find themselves frustrated with vision left unrealized. IT teams feel frustrated when they see ill-defined requirements from marketing. Content engineering remediates some of those issues and helps create a better, more effective working environment for customer value delivery.
7. **Competitive market advantage**
   Content engineering makes organizations smarter. It improves the value of content assets across the enterprise, and it connects those assets with customers intelligently. Smarter organizations with more nimble content assets will be better prepared to compete for market position and customer mindshare.

Challenge and Call to Action

You can introduce the concepts and start collecting perspectives from marketing, IT, C-suite executives, and partners, all of which can feed into a feasibility review.

Consider:

- How can you streamline your CEM projects with a content engineering function?
- What can you do to introduce and highlight the value of the content engineer in your organization?
- Who among your existing team would be appropriate to cross-train as a content engineer?
- What would need to change in your current process to include content engineering?
- What problems will content engineering avoid in projects?
- What benefits will CE bring to your environment, and how can you communicate those advantages?

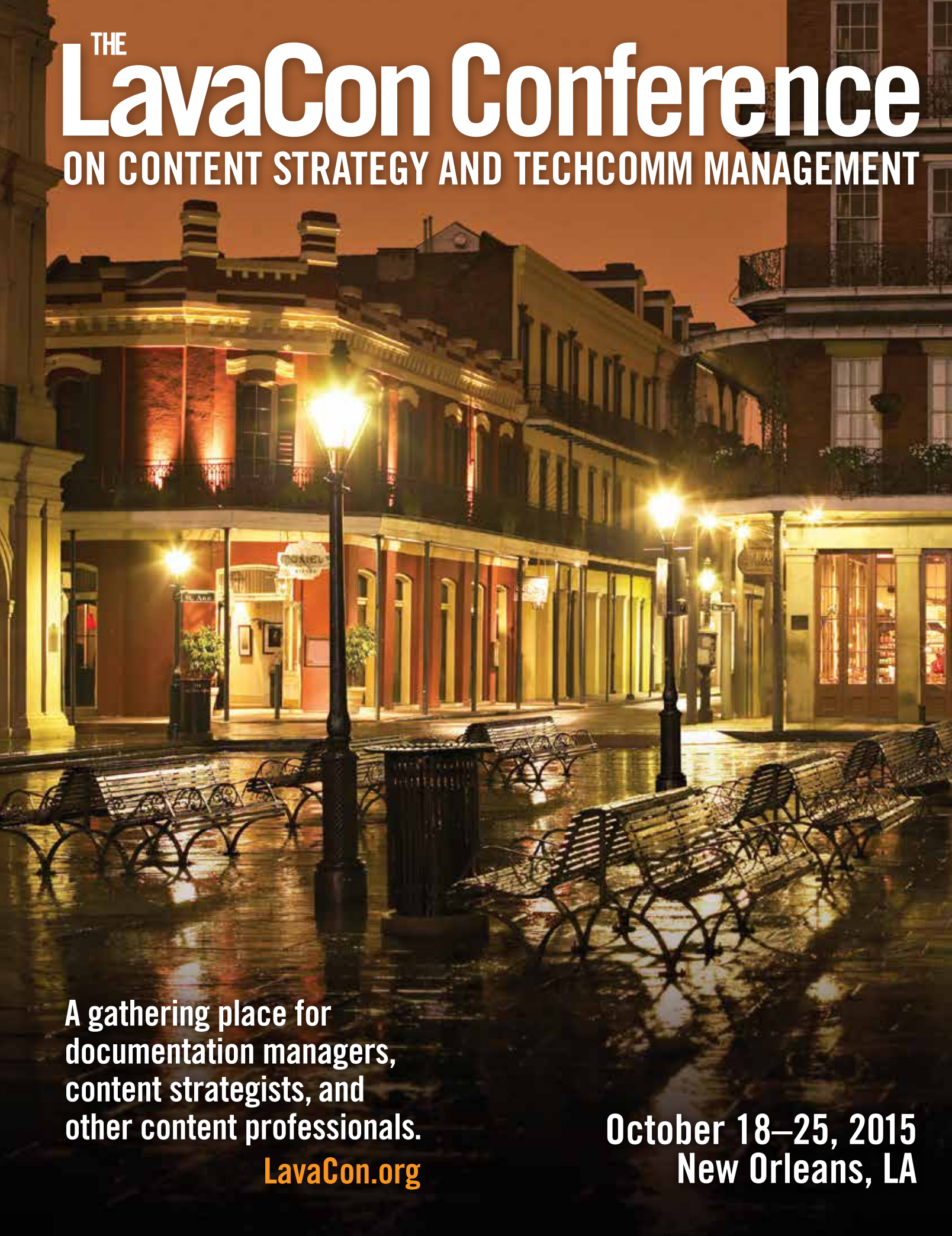
CEM desperately needs content engineering. Marketers can learn a lot from technical communicators. Technical communicators are well positioned to take up the content engineering charge inside their organizations. Seek to highlight the valuable role of the content engineer and lead the discussion on content engineering in your organization. Together, we will make the content engineering role and process a mainstream norm.

Content engineering should have a place in your organization. It just takes some simple, actionable steps, a bit of advocacy, training, and some trial and error. The long-term rewards to building a content engineering competence in your organization will far outweigh the costs.

The best time to start is now. Start by building a content engineering practice internally at your organization. Content engineering isn't easy, but it can become simple—once you get started.

CRUCE SAUNDERS *is the founder and principal consultant at Simple [A]. Cruce and his team lead large-scale content engineering engagements in close partnership with agencies and institutional clients. [A] operates with distributed offices in the United States and Latin America, and delivers content engineering, CMS implementation, infrastructure, and personalization for complex digital properties. [A] trains the content engineering function into organizations and enables cross-functional project operations. Cruce has directed upward of 300 large digital development projects since 1999, including large government, healthcare, education, association, non-profit, and enterprise institutions.*

Simple [A] offers content engineering training and practice development services, as well as free materials to help you get started. For more information about content engineering, request a free copy of Content Engineering for a Multi-Channel World *on* simplea.com *or follow Cruce at @mrcruce or [A] at* @simpleateam *on Twitter.*


THE
LavaCon Conference
ON CONTENT STRATEGY AND TECHCOMM MANAGEMENT
A gathering place for
documentation managers,
content strategists, and
other content professionals.
LavaCon.org
October 18–25, 2015
New Orleans, LA

shutterstock.com/ Goodluz

Become the Driving Force in Your Own Career:

A TECHNICAL WRITER'S GUIDE TO SUCCESS

By TOM ALDOUS

WHILE THERE ARE A FEW notable extraverts in the field of technical communication, many technical communicators choose to lament about how little they are valued (vs. widely promoting the value they *do* contribute). Your work can and does make an impact, and making yourself memorable is easier than you may think.

"Only 1% of consumers feel that their expectations for a good customer experience was always met."

—Harris Interactive Survey

If a customer has a bad experience with a company's help desk, chances are they won't complain to someone who can do something about it—they will simply switch to a competitor. It is easier to nurture existing customers than to find new ones, but not many people know just how significant the difference truly is. In fact, it is almost five times more expensive to acquire new customers than to keep an existing customer. Therefore, if you can develop relevant content for customers to solve their own problems, you can improve existing customer retention and lower the need to acquire new customers.

Does that sound like a career growth opportunity to you? It should. If you can sell a concept like this within your organization and with these statistics, everyone will understand your value and how you contribute to the company's growth.

Now that technical content is becoming visible at every point of sale, it is becoming vital that content developers shift their focus from "writing manuals" toward creating content that is more marketing driven. In doing so, technical documentation that was once very dry is now injected with brand personality and attention-grabbing qualities that require a different writing strategy altogether. The only thing that hasn't changed is the need to create content that is necessary to succeed. It's not just about creating good marketing content; now you also have to establish your own persona and significance through the work you produce.

Our roles are changing, our job descriptions are changing, and even our titles are changing to adapt to this new era of content. What we do to evolve and thrive as content contributors in this new era is what defines the future of our careers.

Marketers do not always know what they need to do, logistically. We have the experience because we have been creating intelligent, structured content for years, and we understand how to produce dynamic content to a multi-channel output. These skills, along with many others, will eventually need to be taught to and utilized by marketing. Technical writers can take the lead in this company shift. You have the knowledge needed by marketing and could become an internal consulting reference for your company, increasing your worth tenfold. It is as simple as supply and demand. Where do you stand in the company as the silos are falling down? It's all about where and how you position yourself.

Executive sponsorship is just as important to making a sale as it is when positioning yourself strategically within your own organization. Think about what is important to executives and then offer what you know will resonate with them. For years, executives have been told and sold the importance of customer experience. They understand the value in retaining an existing customer and the cost of acquiring new ones, as mentioned before. This is a great opportunity to position yourself as a skilled player in making customer success tangible through advanced knowledge of the content creation process, and it gives you the ability to flaunt your significance within your company.

When engaging executives and proving your worth, focus on how the work you do benefits upper management as well as the whole company. Explain how your content creates a better customer experience and customer support environment. Focus on how you can increase customer satisfaction, because we know that if customers aren't satisfied, they will leave. Explain how you can make a more satisfactory environment for the customer by creating content they want at a time they need it. And show how to support results with metrics.

When approaching executives, remember that the easiest metrics we can gather are often some of the most boring ones. When presenting any metrics, try to avoid how many words you write or pages you publish. Upper management does not want to hear about how many rewrites you endure, how many releases you support, or even how much more work you are doing than before. Instead, provide metrics that matter. For example, always concentrate on metrics regarding customer satisfaction, customer surveys, customer engagement, comparison to industry benchmarks, and how you can serve the company's goals even better. Pure cost cutting is a hard sell for the executive because it is difficult to continue to cut cost every year. So focus on increasing revenue instead.

Content plays a large role in accelerating time to market for new products. Product documentation must sync with product development so both can deliver at the same time. If either of these groups are behind, it can stall the launch of a new product.

In many cases, products are designed for consumers across the world. Localization is a key factor in opening the door to new markets, and creating content that is easily and inexpensively translated will basically turn the knob for you. If you can create high-quality content that is easy to understand by all, and you can reduce translation costs by even just 10%, you will get the attention of upper management. Combine that with the vision of expanding into a global market to increase revenue, a solid strategy to execute, and quality metrics to tie it all together, and you have a formula for future executive sponsorship as well.

As an executive, what I want to hear from employees is that their goals and values are aligned with the vision for the company and my group. An organization's future vision is usually all about growth. You must identify where the company is trying to go with this development. As with writing, you need to keep your target audience in mind. Find out what is important to the people who have control over your budget, your career at the company, and your potential raises and promotions. By catering directly to these individuals' needs and expectations, you are setting yourself up for success and can take control over you career.

The Content Era is constantly changing, but what is not going to change is the constant need for and flow of content. Your ability to communicate clearly, objectively, and appropriately to your audience is more important than ever. You can become a valuable asset to your organization if you provide the knowledge and insight they seek and the skill to help them execute. If and when they finally understand the true value of content, you become even more valuable. Use this opportunity as we enter the content era to kick your career into high gear and make a name for yourself that is synonymous with success.

"The Content Era is upon us."
—Tom Aldous

TOM ALDOUS, *The Content Era's founder, spent the early years of his career as managing partner and lead XML/CMS consultant at Integrated Technologies, Inc. (InTech). At InTech, Tom deployed many large-scale XML DITA conversion projects in multiple industries. After 20 years at InTech, Tom moved to Adobe Systems and "owned" the FrameMaker, RoboHelp, and Technical Communication Suites global revenue number. Tom was Adobe's lead XML/DITA/XSLT/HTML5/FrameMaker expert. He eventually moved to Acrolinx and served as their senior vice president of global operations, were he acquired an additional aspect on content optimization. Tom has recently returned to his roots of consulting, leveraging his 25+ years of experience in the industry to form The Content Era LLC.*

Seven Soft Skills for Super Success

By BARBARA A. GIAMMONA | *Fellow*

THE BROADWAY MUSICAL *How To Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* features a small book by the same title that offers a litany of recommendations on business behavior that helps humble window-washer J. Pierpont Finch rise rapidly to the top of his company.

While what occurs in the musical is a fantasy, most of the skills mentioned are not actually job skills, but "soft skills"—how you interact with other people and what other people see in your behavior. In the title song, the list includes things like "how to begin making contacts" and "how to observe personnel" (Loesser).

I have been hiring and managing technical communicators since the late 1980s. The workplace has changed a lot since my early days. But one thing hasn't—to be hired, you need both the "hard skills" of your job (such as your technical know-how and authoring tools) and "soft skills." It's the soft skills that are most likely the skills that will differentiate you from the crowd and will assist you in your own rise to the top.

I'd like to offer what I think are the most important soft skills for today's technical communicator. To succeed in the techcomm business, I believe you need the following skills:

Skill	Action
Observation	Pay attention to detail and follow through
Curiosity	Listen and ask pertinent questions
Critical Thinking	Evaluate what's important and leave your ego behind
Leadership	Know how to lead a meeting (in person and virtually)
Flexibility	Adjust your expectations and solve problems
Social Intelligence	Demonstrate good manners (with technology and without it)
Communication	Be skilled in corporate as well as technical communication

Let's look at how each of these skills applies to technical communication.

Observation: Pay Attention to Detail and Follow Through

It's gotten a lot easier to do what we do in this profession in the last 25 years. We used to work hard to see that everything we published was perfect because each book cost a fortune to print, and each printed item was not updated for several years. With faster release cycles and a smaller head count, we just don't have the resources to be as "perfect" today as we once did.

But that doesn't mean that technical communicators, as guardians of information and as responsible professionals, don't have an obligation to produce good, clean, and complete work. I have been watching millennials in the workforce and have noted a trend: As a rule, the world they grew up in didn't demand as much attention to detail so (consequently) they are often content to let things pass as merely "good enough."

For a lot of things in life, good enough is fine. But in my company, where we document safety systems for nuclear power plants, good enough is *not* fine.

"Good follow through is an asset for most professions—and technical writing is no different. It demonstrates personal investment and accountability, and goes a long way to building trust," says Marta Decatrel, a former technical writer who is now an executive director at a global financial services firm.

Your job is to make sure that your work is complete, correct, thoroughly fact-checked, thoroughly reviewed, and to make sure that when you start something, you actually complete it. If people know they can rely on you to do high-quality work, with no loose ends and no dropped balls, you will stand out from your colleagues.

Curiosity: Listen and Ask Pertinent Questions

The art of listening is nearly lost today. It is common to be in a room full of people where everyone is communicating via email or text message at the same time with someone in another room, or another part of the globe! I am as guilty of this as anyone. No one wins in this scenario.

How can you become a better listener?

You know the first step: be fully present. Put away your smartphone and your computer, and participate in the discussion. If you are meeting one-on-one with someone, ask them to put away their distractions, too. If the two of you can stay focused on the exchange of information between you, the time will be more productive and you'll need less time to complete the task at hand.

If you have arranged time with a SME to gather information for the product you are documenting, also come prepared with questions to ask so that you can walk away with the information you really need.

"If you are not strong with good questions on the fly, consider preparing questions ahead of time. When you ask a question, don't just listen to the words, pay attention to the nonverbal communication (tone of voice and body language). This often gives the clue for what to ask next," says Ken Kinard, an executive coach and chief creative officer of Accent Interactive, a creative agency in Hunt Valley, Maryland.

Critical Thinking: Evaluate What's Important and Leave Your Ego Behind

Jack Molisani, the guest editor of this issue, first introduced me to the idea of the "Evaluation of Importances" (see Hubbard). A lot of technical communicators *are* people who are very strong in the "detail orientation" soft skill, so much so that they don't know when to let certain things go. Technical communicators also tend to be very intelligent, often an interesting meld between the creative and the technical sides of the brain. The combination can lead to a person not knowing the appropriate levels of information to raise to their peers or management, or when to stop arguing a point they believe in strongly that may have no actual bearing on the success of a project.

Not wasting time is an important show of respect to the people you work with. Todd Smith, author of the *Little Things Matter*, says in a blog post entitled "Top 10 Soft Skills to Master" (*www.littlethingsmatter.com/blog/2010/12/21/top-10-soft-skills-to-master-in-2011*), "People's tolerance for being disrespected is as low as I have ever seen it. The days of advancing careers by stepping on the toes of co-workers are over. People deserve to be treated with respect and are now demanding it."

Learn how to manage your encounters with the people who provide you with the information you need so that you maximize the time you spend with them. Do your homework, stay on task when you meet with them, and be willing to be told you might be wrong. Check your ego at the door and stand ready to learn.

Leadership: Know How to Lead a Meeting (Virtually and In Person)

Some people think they need to be vivacious and bubbly to be in charge of a meeting. What if you are shy?

"You don't have to be an extrovert to lead meetings effectively," says Kinard. "Lead with your strengths. If, like most introverts, you excel at internal processing, then kick-start your meeting by asking powerful questions. Provoking good conversation gives you something to analyze, and shows that you value other opinions. Then get curious—listen deeper and longer, reflecting on what you hear. The best meetings often feature a group decision that no individual would have made on their own."

Nick Morgan, one of America's top communication theorists and coaches, cites in *Forbes* several concerns around virtual meetings, such as how hard it is to remember what happens because you lack the normal body language and visual cues to help you remember. You can also lack the emotional cues to connect you—the "buzz" you feel in the room if you were actually present. It's also easy for misunderstandings to develop and hard to bond with your colleagues in a virtual setting.

Morgan advises, "Don't try to make virtual meetings into something they're not, or try to make them carry freight they can't. Do the less important things via virtual meetings whenever possible. Save the emotional stuff for face-to-face meetings, because it's emotions and attitudes that are conveyed mostly via body language."

Flexibility: Adjust Your Expectations and Solve Problems

A new member of our team recently experienced her first really challenging project—one where almost everything went wrong. There were certainly a lot of lessons learned in this disastrous project, but perhaps the greatest ones to her personally were learning to adapt to the changing situation each day and solving the problems that arose in real time.

Here are some of the tactics she employed to succeed. She:

- Built individual relationships with team members at all levels, from the top manager to lowliest programmer
- Communicated with her project manager and her direct manager, and escalated issues where appropriate
- Showed she was willing to step up and go the extra mile
- Brought in outside expertise to assist her when she needed to (we ended up engaging an outside SME to lend a hand in the crisis)
- Requested additional product training
- Bent the process (with permission) when doing things the regular way would not serve the success of the project

In the end, multiple soft skills were needed to achieve the goal—relationship building, communication, personal attitude, ability to ask for assistance, and flexibility. These skills, not her technical communications skills, were the ones that actually carried her to the finish line.

Social Intelligence: Demonstrate Good Manners (With Technology and Without It)

You know what's coming here and you are already starting to feel guilty. If you need to change your behavior in one of these areas, the time has come to do it. Someone—your boss, your co-worker, your customer, your significant other, or your children (maybe even your pet)—has noticed your bad behavior in these areas.

What can you work on?

- Don't answer your telephone when you are in a formal, scheduled meeting with another person.
- Don't stare at your smartphone when you are in a conversation with another person, don't answer that text that just came in, and don't review and respond to email.
- Do a self-audit on your social media sharing and make sure you aren't posting or saying things that you don't want your current or potential employer or clients to know about.
- Be present on telephone calls and in-person meetings that you attend (see "Listening" above).
- When at all possible, for a sensitive issue *do* talk in person or via a video chat or telephone call. Some issues are more quickly and appropriately solved with a conversation than with email, chat, or text messaging.

Kevin Kruse, author of *Employee Engagement 2.0*, cited a 2013 study from the University of Southern California Marshall School of Business that found that, in all likelihood, your manners with technology are offending your colleagues:

- 86% of respondents thought it was inappropriate to answer phone calls during formal meetings
- 84% of respondents thought it was inappropriate to write texts or emails during formal meetings
- 75% of respondents thought it was inappropriate to read texts or emails during formal meetings

If you can't focus, aren't listening, have so little respect for the people with whom you are meeting, or feel so controlled by incoming news from others that you can't attend to the task at hand, it probably is time to adjust your behavior.

"I'm all about good manners, no matter what the platform is! It's all being a good, contributing team player and corporate citizen. Treating people with respect creates and fosters an environment where people like to come to work, collaborate, and innovate … with *you*. It helps you build your network and gain people's trust," says Decatrel.

Communication: Be Skilled in Corporate as Well as Technical Communication

This is actually the soft side of a hard skill, because one of the great contributions you can make to your organization is to use your most developed hard skill (writing and communicating information) to benefit not only your customers but also your company as a whole.

I think it is safe to say that most technical communicators do not possess a great deal of political savvy. Hence they actually don't rise through their companies, but rather spend their entire careers writing product documentation.

"Having a good sense of corporate politics and culture can certainly help technical communicators hone their writing for an intended audience. In addition, developing these skills can open up new career opportunities for you," says Decatrel, who is a living example of this kind of success. "And these days, when everyone fancies themselves a writer—see the blogosphere for proof —it's all the more important for you to stay relevant by having strong, broad writing skills."

One of the final songs in *How to Succeed* is a rousing anthem called "The Brotherhood of Man" (Loesser).

One man may seem incompetent,
Another not make sense,
While others look like quite a waste
Of company expense.

They need a brother's leadership,
So please don't do them in.
Remember mediocrity
Is not a mortal sin.

My hope is that you won't settle for mediocrity, but will rise above wherever you may be in your organization, and move quickly to the top just like J. Pierpont Finch.

Which soft skills do *you* need to practice?

The top is waiting for you!

BARBARA A. GIAMMONA *has been a manager of technical communicators for more than 25 years. She is currently the senior manager of technical publications for Schneider Electric Process Automation, based in Lake Forest, California. She is a frequent presenter and author of articles on management topics for STC. Barbara holds a BA degree in English from the University of California, Irvine, and an MS in the management of technology from the Polytechnic Institute of New York University.*

REFERENCES

Hubbard, L. Ron. *The Axioms of Dianetics and Scientology*, Axiom 58: "Intelligence and judgment are measured by the ability to evaluate relative importances. Corollary: The ability to evaluate importances and unimportances is the highest faculty of logic." *www.whatisscientology.org/html/Part14/Chp41/pg0769-a.html*

Kruse, Kevin. 2013. "Why Successful People Never Bring Smartphones Into Meetings," *Forbes* magazine, *www.forbes.com/sites/kevinkruse/2013/12/26/why-successful-people-never-bring-smartphones-into-meetings.*

Loesser, Frank. 1961. "How to Succeed," *www.songlyrics.com/how-to-succeed-in-business-without-really-trying/how-to-succeed-lyrics/.*

Loesser, Frank, 1961. "The Brotherhood of Man," *www.songlyrics.com/how-to-succeed-in-business-without-really-trying/brotherhood-of-man-lyrics.*

Morgan, Nick. 2012. "Five Fatal Flaws with Virtual Meetings," *Forbes* magazine, *www.forbes.com/sites/nickmorgan/2012/10/02/5-fatal-flaws-with-virtual-meetings.*

shutterstock.com/ Syda Productions

Becoming an Influencer: It's Easier Than You Think

By LISA PIETRANGELI | *Senior Member*

YOU'VE GOT SKILLS. Mad skills. That's why you have a job and a career and are respected in your field. You know what to write and which buttons to push and how to meet deadlines. As a technical communicator, you excel at making the complex simple and at adapting to new methods and tools. You seek them. You understand them. But are you successful in implementing them? Are you able to sell your ideas to your company? Do you know how to get the funding and headcount to make change happen?

Have you ever thought:

- I know there is a better way to do this; or
- I saw a pretty impressive tool that I bet we could use to solve our specific challenges; or
- I know my company is considering some improvements. I wish I could give them my advice about what we need so something isn't just handed to me.

Of course you have. We all have. Maybe even on a daily basis. The question is, how can you be more proactive and influence decisions that will help your own work environment, your team's productivity, and your company's bottom line?

Show and Tell

Attend conferences and webinars or read thought-inspiring discussions. Identify methods, tools, or ideas that you believe can benefit your company. Even if it doesn't seem like it, your company is counting on you to bring new ideas to the table.

As an employer, I encourage my entire team (from directors to co-ops) to voice their ideas. Why? Because we're all in this together. Your company relies on you, but sometimes it's difficult to be heard. Depending on your company's culture, you may or may not have obvious opportunities to contribute ideas. Even if you've never been directly asked, that doesn't mean you shouldn't be part of the conversation. Take the initiative. Start the conversation. Insert yourself into the development process. Become an influencer!

Build a Case and Be an Influencer

Yes, you are an influencer. You may not be perceived to be an influencer, but that's about to change. Don't wait for things to happen. Help yourself and your company by becoming the go-to person for industry knowledge.

This is a concept I've helped my customers and other technical communicators put into practice when they're exploring a new solution. In doing so, I realized the importance of simplifying the approach in order to encourage action. I recommend breaking down the process of building a case into five steps. These are not radical ideas—quite the contrary. My intent is only to show you a simple path toward building a case, how to better speak the language of your company's decision makers, and to recognize the benefits that your expertise will bring to your team.

Five Steps to Building Your Case

The goal is to start thinking about what goes into this type of initiative. Following these five steps will have you on your way to helping progress your team and your company.

Step 1: Become the Expert and Share Knowledge

When it comes to collecting information, you're a pro. You attend conferences, talks, webinars, and programs. How often do you take what you learn and share it with your company in a way that inspires action? It's so important to use what you learn, and to really experience it. What better way to apply what you know than by developing and sharing your expertise and influencing change?

Hopefully your company is supportive and sends you to conferences and other events. Support your company and your own career by showing the benefits of what you learn. In anticipation of sharing your experience, schedule and organize an informational meeting with your team and managers to open up discussions. Here you will present your ideas and establish common ground.

- Establish consensus about challenges and goals.
- Ask a vendor or peer who is using a product you're interested in to conduct a demonstration or run a brief workshop.
- Welcome outside expertise and experience so you, too, can expand what you understand about the topic.
- Introduce perceived benefits, not as fact but as opportunity.
- Demonstrate solutions in the context of agreed challenges.
- Demonstrate process improvements, time savings, money savings, and whatever else is important to your team.

An objective approach will make it easier to pull everyone together, so lead an open discussion and allow everyone to express their willingness to be part of the solutions.

Step 2: Analyze Current State

This is your discovery phase. In this phase, everyone needs to agree on where you are now, what the challenges are, and admit what's not working. You must also identify what *is* working. Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater, as they say. Most importantly, you need to be able to show examples of *why* something is or is not working and examples of the results and effects of each. These realizations and observations will drive your next steps, so give this some thought. In this exploratory phase, try to avoid language that's too judgmental or negative. Examples of failure are a necessary part of business and progress, so they're to be expected. Think of your current state in the current context; everyone is on board to solve problems, which is a good thing. Objectively admit what needs improvement and look ahead.

We're not focusing on the *how* here, just the *what*. Now is the time to get buy-in and start prioritizing what to address. It's also important to determine:

- Is there data available to support your current state assessment?
- Are there particular goals that your company is working toward?

I guarantee there are both. Don't find out that you're in the dark about what your company needs outside of your immediate department. Talk to people and collect the validation that will help your cause.

Step 3: Define Desired End State

This is the fun part! What do you want and why? Eventually this will be the basis of your overall improvement strategy. Be prepared to answer the following questions:

- If we have "this," what will it buy us?
- How will it benefit the company?
- Why is it important to us?

It's okay to have pie-in-the-sky ideas at first, but then come back down to earth and really define where you want to be in the next 6 months, 12 months, 2 years, 5 years. Identify potential opportunities to implement company-wide changes as well as changes within your immediate group. You may have a really clear picture of how your team contributes to the company's bottom line, or you may not. For now, create something that is comprehensive enough to share without being overwhelming. You need to document a desired end state set in the context of what's important to your team and how that impacts the company overall. Your company's decision makers will consider both.

Remember that we're not talking about *how* yet. First, establish expected and desired outcomes to improve identified challenges. Determine an overall strategic approach to address:

- Process improvements
- Team members working at optimal states
- Tools that will drive and support the desired outcome

Expectations should be continual, not point-in-time. Keep that in mind when defining successes.

Step 4: Calculate ROI

Talking dollars and cents may not be your thing, but it's a critical step in making things happen. Don't panic! Calculating a project return on investment (ROI) doesn't have to start out with more than a few basic data points. It also does not need to be spot-on accurate. It's best to start with a specific, completed project that's representative of a typical situation. Review the project with these things in mind:

- How many people are involved?
- What are the roles/resources required for the project?
- What are the individual salaries for specific roles/resources?
- What is the volume per person (percentage of time spent) on the specific project?
- What are the steps in the project that require resources?
  - Writing?
  - Editing?
  - Printing?

  - Distribution?
  - Translation?
- What are the time requirements for each step?
- What is the cost of production?
- What is the cost of delays?

There are a lot of basic ROI calculators available publically on the Web, so find one that has most of the data points you have access to. At this stage, estimates are fine. You want to be able to weigh existing processes and tools with estimated costs, savings, and return of new processes and/or tools. Your findings may reveal that roles need to shift or you may find that there's a weak link in the process that you didn't previously realize. Or you may identify an opportunity that you can take advantage of immediately while you are working toward longer-term goals. It's easier than it sounds and it's all actionable information.

This step is ongoing to both support and test your projections. Keep coming back to it, especially in conjunction with Step 5. Use smaller projects and timelines to set expectations from larger projects and I'm confident you'll quickly figure out what data you need to measure in order to define a successful outcome.

Step 5: Plan, Execute, and Measure

How will you know it's working? That's the question any decision maker and invested party will want to know the answer to. The effectiveness of the solution must be measurable in some capacity, likely even before it's been implemented. Start with these concepts:

- Establish a baseline. This comes out of your ROI calculation. Define a typical project and its cost, requirements, necessary resources, etc.
- Identify a short-term project that will be the first to work with your newly approved tool and/or methods.

Out of the results of that short-term project, identify long-term projections; this includes identifying the relationship between the original project and future projects.

Clearly define what success will look like:

- Here is what we wanted to do.
- Here is how we did it.
- This is how we know it worked.

Maybe success means your company completes a project a month faster than is estimated. Or the solution reduced the cost of the first project by 25%. Determine how you will know if your improvements are really improvements and not just perceived as such.

Establish metrics that can be easily obtained in the future so you may continue to apply them to your team's goals and desired end state. Some things are easier to measure than others.

You need to ask yourself:

- What drives your company?

With these tools in place, you will get someone's attention and show your initiative to be a thought leader. You will have the power to influence changes that will benefit your team and your entire company.

- Is quality based on customer satisfaction?
- Could you simplify your review process?
- Could you lower translation costs?
- Could you accelerate launch dates?

There are always critical factors that outweigh others, so work with your company to figure out what those are and measure success against them.

What Should You End Up With?

You're probably wondering what you should have at the end of these steps. In very simple, tactical terms, you will have developed an organized 5–10 page document as an assessment of these five steps; a simple, clear ROI calculator; and a brief presentation (PowerPoint or other) to help support your case. With these tools in place, you will get someone's attention and show your initiative to be a thought leader. You will have the power to influence changes that will benefit your team and your entire company.

Acknowledge and share your expertise. Organize your ideas. Get buy-in from others. Define challenges and success. You'll be on your way to a strategy that will propel your career and your company forward.

Call To Action

Contact me at *lisap@thirtysix.net* for the 5 Steps Worksheets I have used in workshop training sessions. They will help get you started with your own business case. Happy to share!

LISA PIETRANGELI (lisap@36software.com) *is a managing partner at 36Software. She specializes in working with customers to develop customized content development strategies. She excels at thinking strategically as well as seeing a plan through to completion. Lisa has been a member of STC for over a decade. At the Society level, Lisa has provided presentations, workshops, and progression sessions at the STC Summit since 2010. She has also provided educational webinars for STC and has taught certificate courses for the past three years. She has provided live programs and webinars to many STC chapters. As a business owner, Lisa's company has participated in the STC Summit and Spectrum as a sponsor since 2010. Within her local Rochester Chapter, Lisa served as vice president and member-at-large. Lisa was honored with the Rookie of the Year award for bringing in a record number of sponsors to Rochester's Spectrum conference.*

shutterstock.com/ edel

A Printer, a Desktop, and a Tablet Walk into a Bar: Creating TechComm Nirvana

By CHRISTOPHER WARD | *Senior Member*

Defining Nirvana

In TechComm Nirvana, technical communicators have the resources they need, job security, and are being counseled at the top level of business strategy. This article is a guide to help you on your way to enlightenment, a path that will lead to a place where content is the most pivotal asset for an organization's continued success.

Would you like to become enlightened?

Let me tell you about the journey and what you will have to ponder to set your mind free and give your words influence.

Buddha said, to obtain Nirvana, one must have proper understanding of the four noble truths (understanding of suffering, cause of suffering, relief of suffering, and the way to end suffering). Like Buddha's Nirvana, TechComm Nirvana is similar in that you, too, must have proper understanding. Unlike Buddha's Nirvana, the understanding lies in the questions you ask, not the suffering you experience.

Three questions will put you on the path to Nirvana, and the journey lies in finding the answers.

- Whom do you serve?
- What is the desired outcome?
- Do you have the resources?

Whom Do You Serve?

The first question on your road to enlightenment is also the inspiration for the title of this article. Most would say, "we serve the audience," and their journey would end. However, the others, the ones seeking true enlightenment, will seek to understand not only "whom" but also "how." A technical communicator with influence is serving an organization, who in turn is servicing an audience. Let me tell you a story of a bartender.

A printer, a desktop, and a tablet walk into a bar and the bartender looks at the printer and says, "My audience wants print. I will serve you," and both are happy. The bar owner looks at the bartender and says, "I see you are a happy bartender, are you happy working here?" "Yes," says the bartender. "Is your audience happy?" asks the owner. "Yes," says the bartender. Then the owner looks at the bartender and says, "I must now chop off your head and outsource your job, because I am not happy at all." The bartender goes to his death not understanding why his owner was not happy. Why was the owner not happy? Because the owner wanted the desktop and the tablet to be happy in addition to the printer. A truly enlightened bartender would have served the printer, the desktop, *and* the tablet. And yet, the bartender would also serve the owner, and even those who have not yet come into the bar.

So Grasshopper, what have we learned from this? If you want to gain influence, then understand that you do not write to an *audience*, you write to a *market*. Your business wants to serve all of them, even the ones who are not your customers … yet.

What Is the Desired Outcome?

How can one achieve a desired outcome? With outcomes, not only is it important that you understand *why* you are asking the question, but it is also important to understand *to whom* you are asking.

A happy servant, sitting by a brown dog, is watching the sunset. His master approaches and upon seeing the servant, desires to share in his serenity. Smiling at the servant, the servant bows and smiles back. "Does your dog bite?" asks the master. "Why no, Master, my dog does not bite. He is a happy dog." Pleased with the answer, the master bends down to pet the brown dog. The dog sniffs the master's hand, then bites it, swallowing two of the master's fingers. In agony, the master yells at the servant, "I thought you said your dog does not bite!" Puzzled, the servant looks and says, "But master, that is not my dog!"

What do we learn from this? We must first understand to whom we are speaking when we ask this question. We must also understand that if we act without all the information, we could get bitten.

In the 1990s, Borders and Barnes & Noble bookstores had 40% of the total bookselling market. Today, Amazon is the leading retailer for books, almost tripling sales from Barnes & Noble alone. Borders closed all their stores in 2011. Do you think this was the desired outcome for the two bookstore giants?

The market for book buyers did not decrease. In fact, it grew. The difference was information, or lack of information, used to build a strategy. Amazon saw the potential for online sales and even noticed that the market started to prefer that method. They started with usual items like free shipping, but as new technology like eBooks developed, they embraced it.

On your path to enlightenment, you must develop procedures to obtain certain desired outcomes. Since your organization's strategy is the "truth" you desire, you want to ensure that *your* procedures align with *that* strategy. This is the basic understanding for obtaining a desired outcome. A truly enlightened technical communicator will include procedures that allow you to talk to the market and feed that information back to the organization. Helping organizations determine market shifts will give technical communicators influence.

Do You Have the Resources?

When you come to this part of your journey, TechComm Nirvana is within your reach. When writing to a market and aligning your procedures to your business' strategy, if you do not have the resources to accomplish this, then you must get them. For those who are not enlightened, this task is insurmountable. The enlightened ones hold tight to truth that allows them to fight for all the resources they need. The truth that what they do matters, and matters to everyone.

Professor Eric Clemons from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania has written an article titled, "How Information Changes Consumer Behavior and How Consumer Behavior Determines Corporate Strategy" *(http://faculty.washington.edu/mfan/is582/articles/Clemons.pdf)*. In it, he talks about how consumers' purchasing behavior has changed due to the accessibility of information. This shift affects all markets, because the number of consumers demanding better content continues to grow. They are driving the demand for content, your content, and this is one of the reasons why what you do is so valuable to organizations.

An enlightened technical communicator understands this and takes strength in it when asking for resources.

Here are some simple questions you can ask to help evaluate if your current resource will aid you in your journey to enlightenment.

- Do you have what you need to write to a market?
- Do your current procedures align with the organization's strategy?
- Do you have the ability to talk directly to the market?

Answering these questions will help you identify the resources you need and conclude your journey to TechComm Nirvana.

Go and Be Enlightened

I hope this has been helpful and you have a better understanding of the path to TechComm Nirvana. You serve the organization by writing to the market, you always know the desired outcome from aligning your process with strategy, and you matter enough to get the resources you need.

I will leave you with one more bit of wisdom. Ask yourself, "Why do I want influence?" then look at what you do. You share enlightenment. It is the noblest act of mankind.

Socrates says, "in the world of knowledge the idea of good appears last of all, and is seen only with an effort; and, when seen is also inferred to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right." Your craft must be kept pure and available to the people who need it the most. In a world of "too big to fail," the little guy gets stepped on every day. You bring him up, you are his champion, and you must continue. If we let content development get outsourced, if we let our important mission get tucked away under marketing, we did it because we choose not to influence.

You have the questions. You can find the answers. TechComm Nivana is within your grasp!

CHRISTOPHER WARD, *director of sales at WebWorks, specializes in helping teams accomplish big things by better aligning departmental processes with overall company strategies. Christopher's experience in strategy development began as an analyst for U.S. Army Intelligence and then later moved in to the corporate world when working for Dell computers. His diverse experiences allow him to recognize untapped potential in a company's overall business strategy and help them achieve that potential. For over the past five years, his mission has been is to increase the value of technical communication departments in the organizations they serve. He has traveled all over the world delivering the message that "Documentation is not a business expense, it is a revenue generating tool."*

Badass—An Interview with Kathy Sierra

BY NICKY BLEIEL | *Senior Member*

Kathy Sierra is the author of many successful books, including the award winning Head First *series with Bert Bates. She's an in-demand conference speaker, trainer, programmer, and the founder of the online community JavaRanch. In this interview, she and Nicky Bleiel discuss her new book,* Badass: Making Users Awesome.

Nicky Bleiel: Kathy, thanks so much for joining me to discuss your new book. I must admit, the minute I heard the title I wanted to interview you about it, because technical communicators consider our main goal "making users successful." Your book ups that ante to "making users awesome." That's impressive.

Kathy Sierra: Thank you. That title was actually controversial. For a long time they didn't want to use the word, "badass." I chose it very deliberately, because I use to refer to it as making "passionate" users. But I realized how many time people mistook "passionate" to mean "people are really enthusiastic about the brand." I always meant "growing expertise," not "we love the brand" or "we love the product."

I chose "badass" because it was just a more difficult word to get wrong.

NB: It is much less ambiguous. What was actually the impetus for writing *Badass*? It was many years in the making, correct?

KS: It was. I delivered it about six years late. I'm the worst possible role model for meeting a deadline but I had very patient publishers.

Badass started after we (Bert Bates and I) started the Head First series, with the first book, *Head First Java*. It wasn't originally going to be a series. There was also a lot of controversy about that book, because it didn't look like a typical programming book. People who flipped through the pages, but didn't actually study what it was doing, would say, "Oh, this is just really a dumb-downed book. It's just basically cartoons." They didn't understand at all what was happening. They didn't look at it. They didn't realize that it actually went to a pretty advanced level.

When *Head First Java* became so successful—it became the number one programming book and 10 years later it is still the number one Java programming book. In fact, it is one of the longest running technical best sellers on Amazon. People always said, "Why? Why is this book successful?"

"Badass" started as a series of private talks for publishers and technical people, and a few very specific conferences. That's how it really all evolved; it was our attempt to say, "This is why we did it this way."

NB: To me, what's separates this book from most books about building a better product or building a better user, is the fact that you used cognitive science to explain why your recommendations are sound. Could you explain a why you took this direction?

KS: Yes, cognitive science and other aspects of psychology. Cognitive science is familiar to me and to Bert, because long ago we both worked in artificial intelligence. It just resonates for us. But really, the main thing is, I think it provides a way of "thinking about thinking" that's broader and I think in many ways more useful than what has often been educational theory.

NB: In the book, you say that where we—the royal we—go wrong is that we tend to focus on our products when we should be focusing on our users. What exactly is a "badass" user and why are they better users?

KS: Yeah, you just asked the big question. There are several little pieces to this. The first one is that, when we buy a product, we're not buying the product per se; we're buying the thing that we intend to do with it. Some people refer to that as "the job that you're hiring the product to do." You have some context in which you want to use this product.

It's very rarely about the thing itself. A simple example is one I used in the book: marketing for a high end camera is all about photography. It's not about the camera. Then, as soon as you buy the camera, you've spent your $2,000, you just get the manual—which is about nothing but the camera.

The goal when we buy a product—the goal when buying a camera— is not to just master the camera. It is photography.

Our job is to help people become better at the context in which they're going to use a product. The extent to which we help people become better at the context is really the best help for creating the kinds of user experiences where people are likely to tell other people about that product.

Companies are focused on getting the user to love the company, love the brand. You need to switch your point of view to helping the user love what he is able to do, as a result of that product. Another way to say that is, people aren't buying a product because they love the company, they're buying the product—deep

down—because they love themselves. They want to do something that's actually good for themselves.

A "badass" user is someone who is becoming more and more badass at the greater context, the context in which the product is used versus the product itself.

NB: In the book you take some jabs at common strategies for what people call "brand engagement," such as gamification, social media likes, and viral videos. Why do you think these things can actually make users feel less engaged?

KS: There are a few reasons. I won't go into all the details about the problems with gamification, because there's a lot of work out there now that people can refer to. But what's typically called "gamification," is just operant conditioning, just another form of Skinner. It's using the same psychological principles as gambling. That's not exactly empowering to anyone. It's certainly not producing more skills for the people who are "becoming engaged."

But there's another problem, which is gamification is literally consuming someone's cognitive resources to engage in it. They cannot be simultaneously "engaging with your brand" and actually getting better at something at the same time, something they care about. We're only shooting ourselves in the foot by trying to take their interest and attention when people have such a limited amount as it is.

NB: You note in your book that users need to get through what you call the "suck zone" before they could move onto "badass." In a nutshell, what is the "suck zone" and how can we help users get through it faster?

KS: The "suck zone" is the part of the learning curve. Depending on how complex and difficult whatever it is that they're learning—where it's not yet in any way intrinsically rewarding and possibly feels really bad. It's a threshold. If you cross out of the "suck zone" then you at least have a chance to keep going. But we don't want to lose people because they drop out while they're still in that "suck zone."

We also have to help them stay motivated while they're in it. When I say motivated, I'm not referring to gamification-style motivation, but the kind of motivation that allows them to believe it's worth it.

A lot of times we lose people, especially in difficult technical topics, because the topics are really difficult. They are challenging. I teach programming. There a lot of things that are challenging. We try to pretend like that's not the case.

Part of the problem with a lot of technical documentation is not that the documentation itself is too difficult for people—it's that we act as though it's not. People drop out because they don't realize that actively struggling is temporary and it's typical. Sometimes all you have to do is say, "Yes, this is going to be difficult. This is part right here is going to be confusing. You're actually not going to understand all that's going on right now, but hang in there because it will all start to coalesce over time. Don't worry about it, you can keep moving forward now."

We know how easy it is to overwhelm short-term memory. We need to honor that. That's part of keeping someone motivated.

NB: A little bit of truth telling could go a long way.

KS: Oh yeah, and very little.

NB: This book is appropriate for anyone who wants to create a successful product. It's essentially a business book in a way, but there are many tips that can help technical communicators create better content.

I'd like to talk about those for a minute. You actually give a lot of great advice about what users need and why they need it. Can I throw out a few common deliverables and you share your opinions of them?

KS: Absolutely.

NB: "Tips and Tricks" documents.

KS: I think "Tips and Tricks" are great because tips and tricks can help provide that really intrinsically rewarding motivation for people when they're still, for example, in the "suck zone" and as they move up the curve.

It can feel what it's like to be making progress, even if they're not yet there. I think "Tips and Tricks" are incredibly helpful. They also can be just a way of conserving people's cognitive resources. If you can give them a tip or a trick, you've just spared their brain.

NB: Cheat Sheets, also known as Quick Reference Guides or Job Aids.

KS: Yes, and those are also fantastic for several reasons. Don Norman wrote *The Psychology of Everyday Things*. It's very outdated but it doesn't matter because the principles are so deeply useful. One of the things he popularized was this idea of "knowledge in the world" versus "knowledge in the head." Any time you can place knowledge in the world you relive the burden of that knowledge having to be in the person's head.

NB: Quick Start Guides.

KS: A tutorial is what we call "teaching by remote control." You're being told which buttons to push and when to push them. You're just moving through this thing. You're not doing anything with enough repetition to actually be able to learn it, learn it deeply.

It's not supported by research on memory. It's not supported by research on perceptional learning. Having said that, it's a great way for people to just get that overall feel of what the whole workflow is like.

NB: One thing that is very popular now is to create short videos that show people how to do a task. What do you think of those types of videos?

KS: The most useless but correct answer is, "Well, it depends." I'm a big fan of video in a lot of different ways. Because showing you how to do it is almost always going to be better than having you read the words about it—and have to make the translation in your head to what that actually means—especially if there aren't any graphics. In that case, it makes sense.

A lot of times, we put out these things, and we're very fuzzy about what its intended use is supposed to be. Whether it's to tell someone, "OK, you should really watch this about 12 times and practice it," versus, "Oh, don't worry about it. This is your cheat sheet. Just pull this video up, and just follow the steps."

That's always on us, I think, to give users that kind of guidance, because they don't know.

NB: Jumping into user manuals themselves, you say in the book that user manuals can help users become badass. The problem is the manuals include everything "just in case" when our brains prefer "just in time." Can you explain that, and how can we solve this problem?

KS: Yes. There are really a couple of issues, but they're related. A lot of product manuals, they're so specific to, again, the product. It's like they've completely forgotten the context in which the user is using it.

Not including that context means that you're giving the person's brain a much harder task to pay attention to, because it doesn't seem relevant. We create our materials as though that wasn't even an issue.

"Just in case" learning is "here are all the facts you need to know about these things," and "just in time" learning is "I need to learn this right now" or "I need to accomplish this task." A lot of learning can't be "just in time" learning. There are things you have to learn in advance. As I say in the book—I don't want my neurosurgeon learning everything "just in time."

If you wrap the things that you want them to learn "just in case" in a contextual "just in time" example, then it helps their brain pay attention, and gives them something to hang this new content onto.

It helps their memory. It helps everything, it provides, usually, a much better experience.

So often, we're looking at all these things and saying, "You've got to know this. You've got to know that." We really have and make sure that all of those things are absolutely necessary. Are they necessary right now? We need to strip out all the edge cases, and all the "let's learn every detail about X." It's taking all that stuff out, and pushing it into an appendix or a reference document, so that they can actually really nail something.

NB: That's true and that takes us to something you mentioned in the book about optimizing content so that the "stuff that matters" gets in the user's brain. That would be one of the ways that you would suggest doing that, correct?

KS: Yeah. It's never made any sense to me. I mean how many software manuals have I read, including commercial books about those products—which is I think even more of a crime—is where they say, "Here's the first chapter. Let's look at the interface. Now, let's look at all of the preferences. Let's set up all the preferences."

I (the reader) have no idea why those preferences actually matter. I don't have the slightest idea. None of it is meaningful. You're just overwhelming my cognitive resources instantly. Now, you've just made me incredibly less capable to actually go further and there's no useful reason to do that.

Instead, we can put it in the documentation the set of trusted defaults and say, "Look, don't worry about this now. You have all the control that you could ever want here."

There's a lot of research about what they call the "tyranny of choice." Having to make decisions is very stressful because, first of all, we're often asking people to make decisions when they don't even have all the information they need, or even any of the information they need. But just making a decision is now burning cognitive resources.

We need to be making those decisions for people. That doesn't mean take away their ability to make the decision. What we take away is forcing them to make a decision or even making them think they need to make that decision right now.

NB: After reading the book, I get the feeling that you think, and you could correct me if I'm wrong, that a technical communicator's overarching goal should be to act as a coach. Would I be reading that right?

KS: I think making sure that people always know that they will be able to do this, that they will be able to get through this. That it's totally doable. Yes.

Again, at every point letting them know there will be a struggle, but they will get out the other side of this and it's totally normal. You are right where you should be.

Because that helps keep people moving forward. Again, even if motivation isn't your goal, which of course it should be, if we're technical communicators, we always have that as a responsibility because if we don't take motivation as our own responsibility—the motivation of the person actually learning, then we are actually potentially de-motivating them.

It really matters. We can't say, "Well, it's their job to be motivated. It's my job just to provide the learning." But that's really not understanding how the brain works. I think it's our job to pay attention to that motivation and keep them moving forward.

NB: Technical communicators consider themselves the "voice of the user." In order to be the voice of the user, we have to know the user and understand the user, and also consider their context.

KS: Yes, we have to know the user. A lot of times, that's interpreted as "we have to know what level of knowledge they have coming in, or we have to know exactly what their job function is coming in."

We don't think about the fact that really "knowing the user" just means "I care who they are." We're forgetting is that they're actually humans. It's pretty easy to make anything better—without having any other knowledge about any specific people who are your users—by just saying, "They're humans. They have brains. Their cognitive resources are very limited."

NB: One of the key points you mentioned in the book is "if we really care about our users, we'll help them do what they want, not what we want." I think that has parallels to the technical communication mantra "Give users what they need, when and where they need it." Do you see that also?

KS: Absolutely. That's really such a noble and useful and ethical goal. As you can imagine, there aren't a lot of groups in the company that often have that as their goal.

If you really look at cognitive resources as the brain's bank account, it's so limited every given day. It has nothing to do with intelligence. It has everything to do with what users have to actually think about, that they can spend those precious, scarce, easily depleted resources on.

Anything we can do to help support drain their resources less is... we're helping their whole life. We are quite literally giving them the opportunity to have more quality time with their kids at home. Those things are so profoundly important, and the way we spend people's cognitive resources, we just waste them—either because we just don't give people anything that helps them or we give them things that deliberately actually make things worse for them.

It would also be giving them what they need, when they need it, and *not* to giving them things they don't need.

NB: I want to thank you so much for joining me, Kathy. I look forward to embracing my role as a coach and applying your advice about respecting cognitive resources in my work.

KS: Thank you so much. This was a really fabulous conversation for me. I know I'm having a conversation with someone who understands the jargon. It's just really great to be able to talk about it.

ASD Simplified Technical English (STE) term checker

STE helps to make instructions as clear as possible. But, STE has many grammar rules and thousands of dictionary rules.

To remember all the rules is difficult. Can you remember the approval status of the word *fluid*?*
- Not approved
- Approved as a noun
- Approved as an adjective
- Approved as a noun and as an adjective.

Can you remember your organization's technical terms and the unapproved alternatives?

The STE term checker from TechScribe helps you to make sure that your text conforms to STE.

Free trial: www.simplified-english.co.uk

* *Fluid* is approved as a noun only, unlike *liquid*, which is approved as a noun and as an adjective.

Techscribe®

Society-Level Offices for 2016

BY AIESSA MOYNA | *Chair, Nominating Committee*

ARE YOU INTERESTED in becoming a candidate for elected office in 2016? Can you suggest, or do you know someone who would make a great contribution to the Society by being elected? Are you interested in learning more about a particular office? If so, the Nominating Committee would like to hear from you. Any member with at least one full year of membership is eligible to run.

This year, the Nominating Committee seeks candidates for the following positions:

- Vice President
- Secretary
- Director (two positions)
- Nominating Committee Member (two positions).

The STC Board includes leaders with both business and academic backgrounds. All candidates should be experienced working at a strategic level, comfortable making decisions collaboratively and focused on outcomes. Previous Society-level leadership experience is not as important as having gained professional skills in managing people, projects and budgets. Serving on the STC Board is a chance to leverage these skills to lead a tax-exempt/nonprofit organization and to help ensure the Society continues providing members with an increasing quality of opportunities and services.

The Nominating Committee is responsible for selecting qualified candidates for Society office. All candidates must have extensive contacts across the Society. Serving on the Nominating Committee provides an opportunity to help shape the future of the Society by identifying leaders to run for elected office.

If you can rise to this challenge, fill out the online nomination form at *http://summit.stc.org/stc-officer-candidate-recommendation-form/*. A link to the form has also been posted at *www.stc.org/election*. You can also contact *stc@stc.org* or call +1 (703) 522-4114 and request that a candidate nomination form be mailed to you.

Use the same form if you want to recommend someone else for office. Submit one form for each person you want to recommend. The deadline for receipt of all forms is 31 July 2015.

Members who complete the nomination form (or who are recommended by others) do not automatically become candidates. Once the forms are received, the Nominating Committee contacts all prospects to confirm their interest. Once confirmed, interested prospects are asked to forward additional information, which the committee uses to determine candidacy.

A healthy Society leadership requires the talents of seasoned leaders with fresh perspectives. All interested members are therefore encouraged to complete and submit the nomination form by 31 July 2015.

Couldn't Attend the Summit? *Now You Can!*

THE 2015 Technical Communication Summit may have just ended, but you can still attend all the sessions—without traveling across the country or across the globe. The content of most of the 80 sessions was captured (audio and visuals) and will be available shortly on the STC website (*www.stc.org*) through Summit Playback! (Formerly Summit@aClick.)

Summit Playback is a collection of session recordings that lets you "attend" the Summit from your home, office, or anywhere else. No matter the reason you didn't go, now the Summit can come to you. And those who *did* go to Columbus will be able to view the sessions they missed or revisit the ones they attended to refresh their memory of the points made by the speakers. **STC's Summit is the only meeting in the technical communication field that offers this added bonus.**

Summit Playback is included in the full registration fee for attendees, who will receive a password to access the content when it's available (email *stc@stc.org* if you do not). Anyone who did not attend the Summit may purchase access to every session we recorded, any minute of the day, at any computer you want. It's all at your fingertips.

And you can go back to these sessions again and again! Your access to Summit Playback runs through 31 March 2016, and you can view as many sessions as you like, as many times as you desire. STC's 2015 Summit had five subject tracks, so there's something for everyone here, from the beginning technical communicator to the experienced manager.

Go to *www.stc.org* and look under the Education tab for Summit Playback to purchase. Take a "road trip" to Columbus, all from the comfort of your home or office!

Add What You Want, Subtract What You Don't

shutterstock.com/ Blablo101

BY JACK MOLISANI | *Fellow*

ONE THE MOST useful lessons I learned in life was from the book *The Chronicles of Amber* by Roger Zalazney.

In his novel, Zalazny postulates that there's an infinite number of universes, and the princes of Amber have the power to move between them. Not by "Poof!" disappearing in a cloud of smoke in one world and "Poof!" rematerializing in another, but by walking (or driving, etc.) and making subtle changes in the landscape as they go. For example, say one of the princes wanted to get from the ocean port to a desert city. He would start walking and think, "around that next house will be a cobblestone street" and there, when he turns the corner, will be a cobblestone street. Then he'd think, shortly the air will get less humid and the sea smells will diminish," and "shortly the air *is* less humid. Then, "over the next hill the terrain will turn sandy," and it does. Finally, by making incremental changes to get from the ocean to the desert, he arrives at his destination.

We move through universes by adding what we want, subtracting what we don't, until finally we arrive at our destinations. What a perfect analogy for managing one's day, one's career, one's *life*. I look back at my own career and see how (although I wasn't aware of doing it at the time), I made additions and subtractions that shifted me through all possible universes until I achieved the one I wanted.

A brief illustration: I started technical writing as an employee, but then got laid off, so I started contracting. My client wanted to bring me on full time but couldn't pay the salary I wanted, so I started my own outsource writing company. When companies asked me to help them find someone they could hire, I added the recruiting division. When I decided I didn't want to fight traffic to commute into an office (and pay the city of Los Angeles's outrageous business taxes), I bought a Web-based applicant tracking system and let all my employees work from home. When the economy crashed and companies stopped hiring, I took on billable tech writing work that I could do myself. When I saw my parents were getting to the age where I'd need to move back to Florida, I stopped taking work that required onsite meetings, and looked for and landed work that could be done remotely. When I was tired of the income ceiling that came with being a contractor (you can only bill so many hours in a week), I went back to headhunting where I could make larger commission checks. When caring for my parents required more and more of my time, I concentrated on finding and placing onsite contractors so I could have a passive income stream for those times when I simply couldn't put in a full work week.

In other words, whenever I found myself in a situation that was no longer ideal (my work preferences changed, the economy changed, my familial obligations changed, etc.), I simply deleted what I didn't like and added what I *did* like until, once again, I arrived at where I wanted to be.

Are you currently in your ideal job, your ideal career, and your ideal tax bracket?

If not, remember there are an infinite number of universes, and all you have to do is add what you want and delete what you don't to arrive at the one you want.

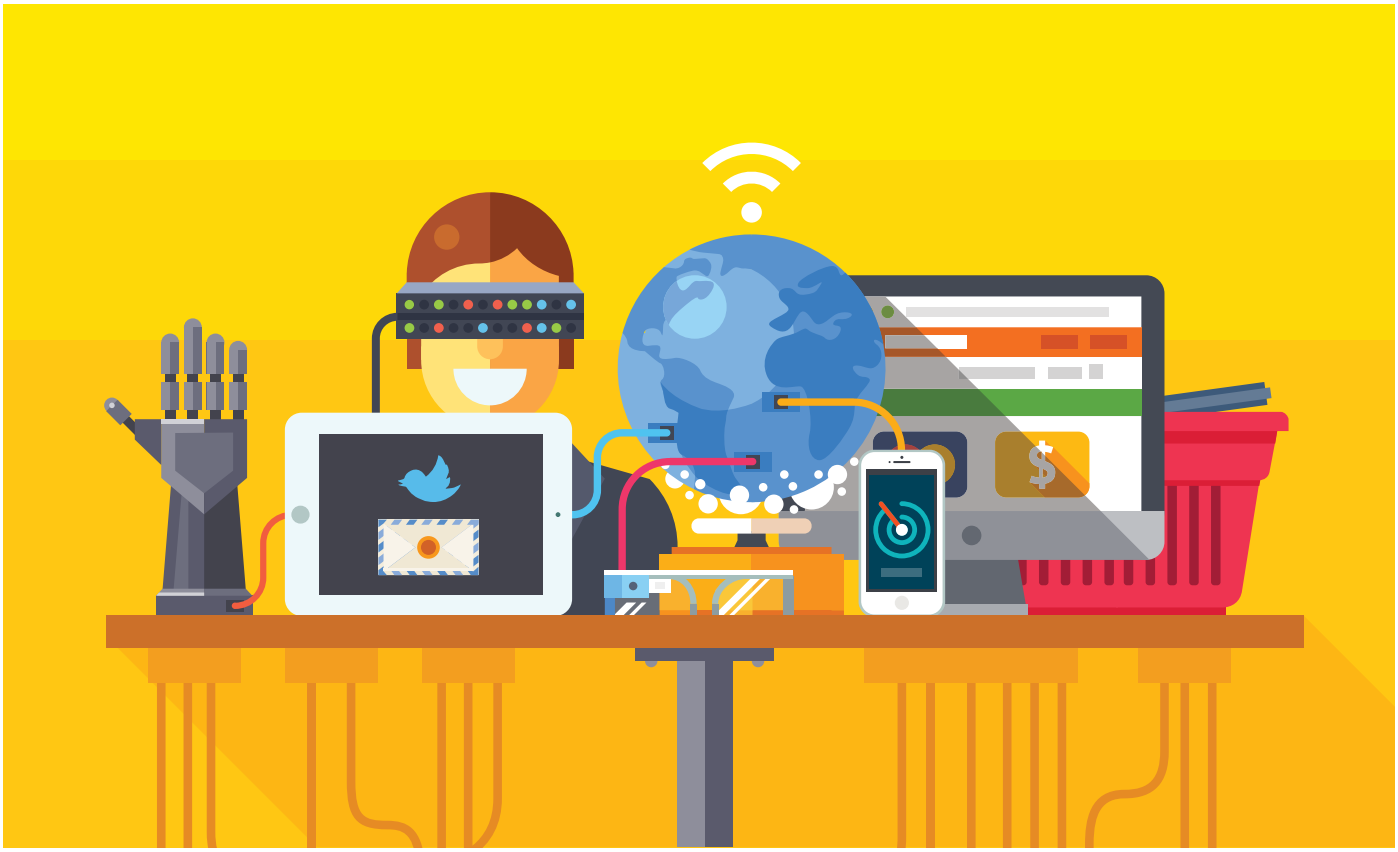
Visualize where you want to be today, next week, next year. *Really* visualize it. Then decide what you need to add and subtract to get there.

Ready to create *your* perfect universe? Start walking!

This column addresses job hunting and career advancement, focusing on various aspects of career growth. It's written from the perspective of someone who has been a technical writer, technical communication manager, and recruiter, and who worked as a captive (full-time) employee and an independent contractor before finally starting his own company. If you have questions or suggestions, email them to *jack@prospringstaffing.com* with "Career Question" in the subject line.

> We move through universes by adding what we want, subtracting what we don't, until finally we arrive at our destinations."

Trying Virtual Reality on the Cheap With Google Cardboard



shutterstock.com/ TastyVector

BY NEIL PERLIN | *Fellow*

WE'VE HEARD FOR YEARS about virtual reality's (VR) potential in technical communication and training but have seen few actual applications because of the cost and effort involved. Today, however, inexpensive new viewers like the Oculus Rift and Microsoft Hololens may be leading your company to take a new look.

Microsoft's Hololens site at *www.microsoft.com/microsoft-hololens/en-us* has examples of live action holograms atop a real environment. And there's Oculus Rift (*www.oculus.com*). But these devices are still emerging. The Microsoft site lets you sign up to receive Hololens news, but there is no option to actually order the device. Oculus's order page at *www.oculus.com/order* is for the development kit and has a checkbox agreement statement that the hardware is for developers and is not a consumer product. But you *can* try virtual reality today almost free. All you need is an Android phone running Android 4.1 or later and the Google Cardboard viewer.

The Cardboard viewer is literally that, a viewer made out of folded cardboard into which you insert the phone. You'll find dozens on Amazon (search for "Google Cardboard"), most under $30, many under $20 (see Figure 1).

What you get is a flat piece of cardboard with embedded lenses. You fold it up (with instructions that could use the help of a technical communicator), and you have the viewer. (I bought the Dark Shader, with the "classy, all-black look" for 15 Euros on Amazon.) After 10 minutes, this was the result (see Figure 2).

This column presents overviews of new technologies that may affect technical communicators in the near future. If you have feedback, or would like to suggest topics for subsequent columns, please contact Neil Perlin at *nperlin@concentric.net*.

Figure 1. Google Cardboard readers

You then start a VR app on your phone, place your phone in a flap in front of the viewer, and watch. What kinds of apps are there? Following are a few examples.

Jurassic Dino (from Lunagames Fun and Games)—This is basically Jurassic Park. The app opens with you standing in a jungle compound, with a jungle drum sound track, surrounded by palm trees, huts, falling leaves, and some movements that turn out to be a velociraptor running around the compound and, nearby, a Tyrannosaurus Rex eating something. The app moves you in the direction you're looking, so you're going to wind up next to the Tyrannosaur's head and can see its eyes, tongue, and teeth. It's all virtual but surprisingly engrossing. One tester let out a yelp and handed me the phone when she wound up standing right next to the Tyrannosaur. What she saw looked like this, except she was closer to the front of the snout so that the eye seemed to be looking directly at her (see Figure 3).

Figure 2. The Darker Shader Google Cardboard viewer in use

Sisters (from otherworld) — This horror story takes place in an old mansion once occupied by two sisters who seem to have disappeared. The story starts during a thunderstorm, naturally. As the power goes on and off, objects in the room move, doors open on their own, and so on with most of the clichés of the genre. Yet clichéd or not, the game is surprisingly eerie; reviewers called it "creepy" and "terrifying" (see Figure 4).

Figure 3. Screenshot from the Jurassic Dino VR app

Figure 4. Screenshot from the Sisters VR app

Figure 5. Screenshot from the Roller Coaster VR app

There are also the usual vertigo-inducing apps like Roller Coaster VR from Fibrum where you ride a deserted coaster on a tropical island (see Figure 5), and others, such as Lava Inc. from The Virtual Dutch Men (a roller coaster through a factory that refines lava?), Village for Google Cardboard from Axiomworks, Inc., and VR Cineam for Cardboard from Mobius Networks (renders MP4 video in a split-screen view that can be played back on a virtual reality headset).

I only tested three apps, so it's risky to make generalizations about VR, but I'll make three anyway.

1. They're fun. (I watched a velociraptor run past me.)
2. They're physically engaging. (As I was sneaking up on the Tyrannosaur and hid behind a tree, I reached out to steady myself against the trunk.)
3. They can have a strong visceral element. (A doll in Sisters was on the left side of a mantelpiece. Then the lights went out. When they came on, the doll was on the right side of the mantelpiece. Creepy indeed. And seeing the Tyrannosaur apparently looking directly at me was jarring.)

VR and Tech Comm

How might VR apply to tech comm? Many physical tasks could lend themselves to being VR-ized, such as:

- Performing maintenance on large equipment like generators. A VR app could help familiarize the technicians with the equipment before they touched the real equipment.
- Making repairs inside a nuclear reactor (for the same reason as above).
- Naval damage control training to familiarize sailors with the environment before sending them into a real training environment. (Read "Damage Control Training Makes Sailors Feel the Heat" at *www.defensemedianetwork.com/stories/sailors-feel-the-heat-2* to get an idea what the training is like.)

Many training simulations no doubt already exist for cases like this. (The naval damage control training center is itself a simulation, and students deal with real fires, real flooding, and real adrenaline.) Tech comm can create training simulations now using tools like Adobe's Captivate or TechSmith's Camtasia. But what those tools can't offer is the immersive 3-D effect and the "viscerality" of the experience. (Standing neck deep in water in a flooding compartment is a great way to learn to keep your ship from sinking, but it has to be an expensive way to learn. An app that teaches the basics of damage control would seem to be a much cheaper and safer way to start.)

Current work is also opening new ideas for integrating VR and reality. For example, see the discussion about integrating VR and roller coasters (*www.vr-coaster.com/index.php*) and read the description on the Discoveries page. Dodging fiery monsters and firing cannons at alien ships while evading asteroids doesn't seem to fit into technical communication, but the idea of overlaying training on top of the real environment offers tremendous possibilities. And the SDKs are available now for the Oculus Rift, Hololens, and Cardboard (*https://developers.google.com/cardboard/android/*).

Summary

I've always wanted to discuss VR in the context of tech comm, but the cost and effort seemed to be so high as to make the use of VR for tech comm unlikely. Then I found out that I could try it for under $20 (thanks to Deb Sauer) with my cell phone—zero effort and essentially free. Think of Cardboard as dipping a toe in the VR waters. Trying Cardboard might lead you to decide that VR is fun but doesn't apply to your needs. But it might give you some ideas. Remember that YouTube was initially derided as a platform for watching videos of dogs on skateboards. Today, many doc groups use YouTube as a distribution medium for video training. VR might follow a similar trajectory. It's worth a look.

NEIL PERLIN (nperlin@nperlin.cnc.net) *is president of Hyper/Word Services (*www.hyperword.com*) of Tewksbury, MA. He has 36 years of experience in technical writing, with 30 in training, consulting, and developing for online formats and tools including WinHelp, HTML Help, JavaHelp, CE Help, XML, RoboHelp, Flare, and others. Neil is MadCap-certified for Flare and Mimic, Adobe-certified for RoboHelp, and Viziapps-certified for the ViziApps mobile app development platform. He is an STC Fellow and the founder and manager of the Beyond the Bleeding Edge stem, which ran at the STC summit from 1999 until 2014.*

Mark Your Calendar

Organization Events Across the Globe

F.Y.I. lists information about nonprofit ventures only. Please send information to *intercom@stc.org.*

1 21–24 June
The **Society for Technical Communication** hosts the Technical Communication Summit in Columbus, OH. For more information, contact:
STC
+1 (703) 522-4114
http://summit.stc.org

2 22-25 June
The **User Experience Professionals Association (UXPA)** 2015 International Conference, with a theme of Simplicity, will be held at the Loews Coronado Bay Resort in Coronado, CA. For more information contact:
UXPA
conf2015@uxpa.org
www.uxpa2015.org

3 12–15 July
The **IEEE Professional Communication Society (PCS)** hosts ProComm 2015 (formerly IPCC), in Limerick, Ireland. For more information, contact:
IEEE PCS
http://pcs.ieee.org/ipcc2015/

4 30 Sept–3 Oct
The **American Medical Writers Association (AMWA)** will hold its 75th annual conference, with a theme of "Quest Toward Brilliance," at the Grand Hyatt San Antonio in San Antonia, TX. For more information, contact:
AMWA
+1 (301) 294-5303
amwa@amwa.org
www.amwa.org/events_annual_conference

5 4-7 Nov
The **American Translators Association (ATA)** will hold its 56th annual conference at the Hyatt Regency Miami in Miami, FL. For more information, contact:
ATA
+1 (703) 683-6100
ata@atanet.org
www.atanet.org/conf/2015

6 6-10 Nov
The **American Society for Information Science and Technology (ASIS&T)** will hold its Annual Meeting in St. Louis, MO. For more information, contact:
ASIS&T
asis@asis.org
https://www.asist.org/events/annual-meeting

7 8-10 Nov
The **Public Relations Society of America (PRSA)** hosts their international conference in Atlanta, GA. For more information, contact:
PRSA
+1 (800) 350-0111
www.prsa.org/Conferences/InternationalConference/

* STC-related event

Ask Me What I'm Knitting

BY CINDY PAO, *with contributions from* **SHARON BURTON, VICI KOSTER-LENHARDT, JULIA LAND, CHERYL LANDES, MARCIA RIEFER JOHNSTON, JAMYE SAGAN, VAL SWISHER,** *and* **DANIELLE VILLEGAS**

THERE WAS A TIME in my life where all I could think about was knitting. Work was stressful, and knitting helped me leave all that in the office. I soon found that there are many like-minded individuals with in STC. We found each other at the Summit, and then we connected online in places like Twitter. Here is our story:

Who taught you to knit?

Marcia, Val, Sharon, and Vici learned from their moms. Jamye learned from her friend's mom. Cindy and Julia's grandmas taught them to knit. Danielle taught herself. Cheryl's third-grade teacher taught her to knit. (It was a class assignment for girls and boys!)

These people taught us the basics. Today, we take classes at yarn shops and online, we seek advice from each other in hotel lobbies and at restaurants, and we turn to YouTube for free videos when we're trying to learn something new.

What do you like most about knitting?

It's relaxing, cheap therapy, and stress relief. Knitting can also be challenging, and it is definitely productive.

You work with some of the prettiest colors, finest fibers, and most complicated stitches.

But Sharon summed it up in this beautiful way: "Making something from sticks and string with my own hands. Giving people I care about handmade gifts. I'm giving them my time."

Different knitting projects by article contributors

Knitters at large

What do you dislike about knitting?

Hands down: Fighting with tangled yarn and making mistakes, especially the ones you find several rows later. Frogging your work is no fun! (Yarn-speak for tear it out. Rip it! Rip it! Get it?!)

Why is knitting like tech comm?

Knitting and tech comm work your brain. The neat thing is that doing both activities helps you work both sides!

You must be patient, curious, methodical, systematic, and organized to communicate technical information and knit a sweater.

You often learn as you go along, even though you have a requirements document or a pattern.

Accuracy in your directions and in patterns is crucial! Even minor errors can throw all of the other directions off.

Don't forget to do your audience analysis so that you create the right thing: Online help or user guide? Bunny slippers or rainbow socks? Hard copy or soft copy? Machine wash or hand wash?

Fortunately, after all that effort, there is something deeply satisfying about what you produce.

Final Thoughts

Danielle added this: "Knitting has been a huge catalyst in helping me to get to know many of the women who are involved in this article. I first connected with Sharon Burton on Twitter because we had both tech comm and knitting in common. When I went to my first tech comm event, she invited me to a yarn crawl with her, Sarah O'Keefe, Marcia Johnston, and Val Swisher. It was these new connections that formed new friendships, and knowing these ladies has helped me meet more people."

The complete authoring and publishing solution for bidirectional technical content is here!

Announcing the 2015 release of Adobe FrameMaker

Right-to-left language support | Native mobile publishing | Simplifed XML authoring | Smoother Word import

Starting at $29.99/month

Try Now | Request Demo | Request Info

Call 800-833-6687
(Monday-Friday, 5am-7pm PST)

Adobe, the Adobe logo, and FrameMaker are either registered trademarks or trademarks of Adobe Systems Incorporated in the United States and/or other countries.
© 2015 Adobe Systems Incorporated. All rights reserved.